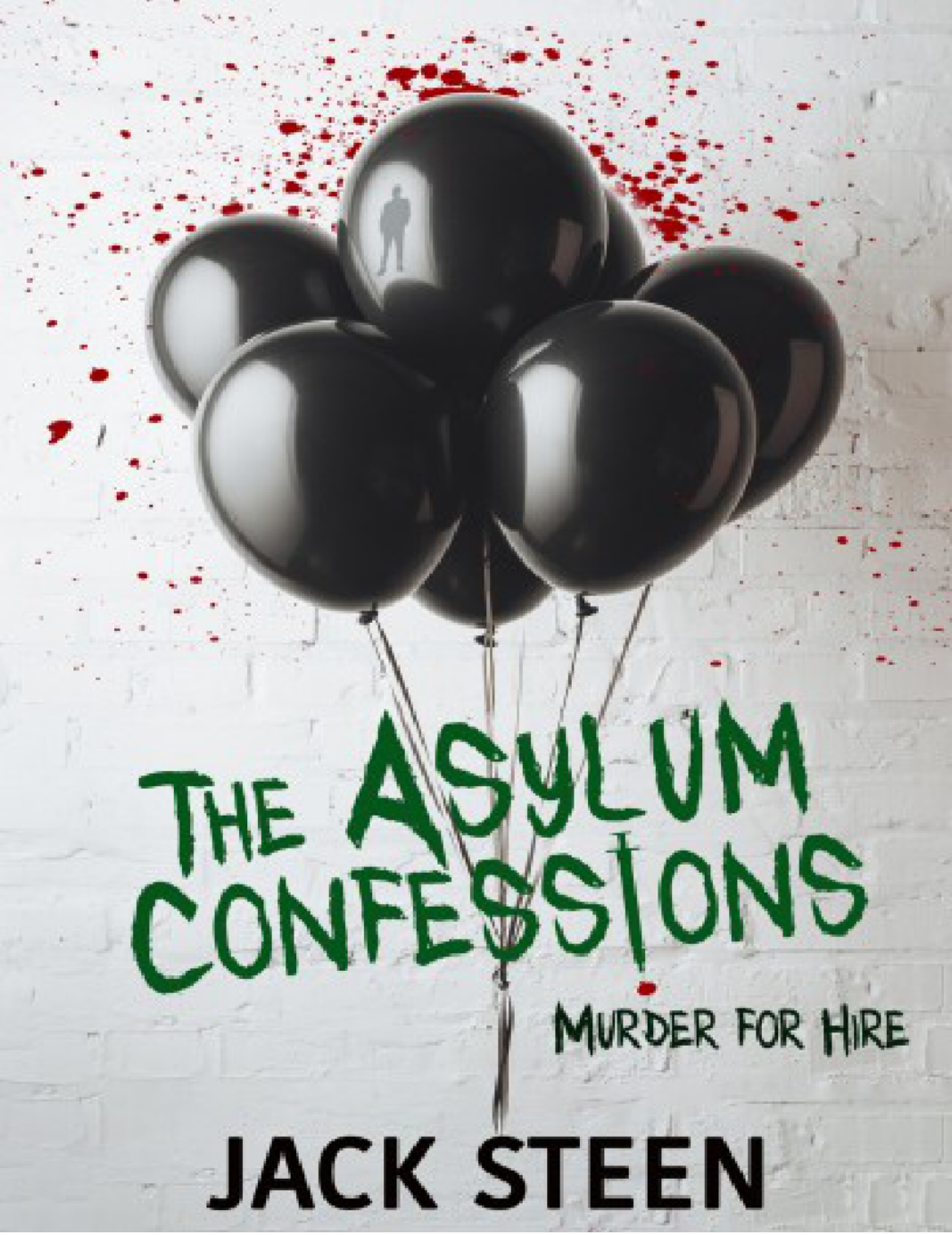
THE ASYLUM CONFESSIONS
MURDER FOR HIRE
JACK STEEN

THE ASYLUM CONFESSIONS

MURDER FOR HIRE

THE ASYLUM CONFESSION FILES

JACK STEEN

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TRIGGER WARNING

I've never done this before in these books, mainly because I figure you know what you're getting into. BUT…the very last confession in here deals with a topic that I believe deserves a heads up.

The confession from JD deals with victims and survivors of rape. No gory details are included, mainly because they aren't necessary. But I did want to warn you in case you are a survivor.

For the record, and in case you need to hear it - you are one hell of a person. You are amazing; you are a god or goddess, and you have a strength most of us can never understand, and the fact that you are here, reading this, tells me just how freaking amazing you are.

Now, I'm not going to assume you can't handle the last confession in this book, but I will ask you not to read it - because YOUR MENTAL HEALTH matters to me.

Jack

NOTE TO READERS

Hey Confession Addicts - it's time for a new confession, and I hope you're ready.

You know how this works by now: my patients arrive on my floor alive, but it's guaranteed that they will always leave dead. Always. The question is usually…is it by my hand or by natural causes?

Does it really matter?

The majority of my patients are expert manipulators. If you've read any of these confessions before now, you get that. If this is your first one…well, welcome to the final game my patients think they're playing.

So what's this confession book about? Murder for hire.

Do you ever watch those Bourne movies? Or any of those other hitmen movies? The majority of my patients who tell me they were hired killers, well, let's just say they like to think of themselves as the best of the best.

Between you and me…no one is as good as Jason Bourne, real or not.

Although, a few of these confessions make me wonder….

To my fellow Asylum addicts in my VIP ADDICTS Subscription groups, long-time readers, and to my new friends…salut!

THANK YOU

Special thank yous to the following “Long Term Patients, Ward Members, and Asylum Addicts” from my VIP ADDICTS Subscription groups. This book would not be possible without your support!

New Patients:

Kort13, Lauraina, Nymfetamin, Jacqueline Martinez

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These confessions are dedicated to you!

JOIN ME

I'm just going to throw this out there: there will be more books. But while you wait, why not join me over on my VIP ADDICTS group?

What happens over there? A lot. Like…you read these confessions before anyone else. Like…you get to name characters. Like…you get free books.

It's also a better way to stay in touch rather than a mailing list that you may or may not see in your inbox.

https://reamstories.com/jacksteen

Click to check it out…no pressure, but if you do sign up, be sure to say hello in one of the posts, and I'll raise a toast to you at the pub.

WHO AM I?

(Hey you…don't skip this part…important info about this book at the end, even if you already think you know 'who I am')

My name is Jack Steen.

By now, if you've read a few of the other confessions, you know my name and what these confession books are about.

I'm a night nurse in the Asylum and I listen to the deathbed confessions of the criminally insane.

For these patients of mine, I'm their companion into the afterlife, their death angel, if you will. I give them the one thing they've been craving for since coming to the Asylum: an audience.

By now, you should know the routine…don't ask which Asylum, because I will never tell. Besides, it really doesn't matter which one - they're all the same. Don't ask me about the patients either - I change their names, victims names, settings etc…I'm serious about not wanting to get sued.

So, what is it I do that's so special? Well, let me tell you: I take their deathbed confessions. The ones no one else has heard—the ones everyone wants to hear.

My patients tell me their stories, and they confess their messed up lives because I do what no one else in this fucking asylum does.

I listen.

I've worked here the longest out of anyone on my floor. I've got the scars, the stitches, and the broken bones to prove it. I worked my way from the shittiest jobs here to the one I have now.

I used to think being a nurse was my calling. My passion.

I thought I could make a difference, and that what I did was meaningful.

I was stupid to think anything in life was worth this shit.

I used to work in a hospital full of people who had lives and loved ones that cared about them. Most of my patients here have been discarded, forgotten about, left to spend their final days alone.

Here's a reminder: I won't tell you which hospital I work at.

I won't tell you the names of those dying.

But I won't lie to you.

You'll read exactly what I'm told.

The confessions you'll read here are all going to focus on one central theme.

This book is about serial killers. We've got such a fascination with them, it's ridiculous - and also probably the reason why we have so many in this country. Trust me when I say there are more serial killers out there than you're aware of.

Scary shit, right?

I can't say all the stories I'm told are one hundred percent true. Some I believe. Some I don't. That shouldn't be surprising, I mean - look at who is telling the confession. Some of my patients are pure psychopaths, narcissistic, and like the sound of their voices. They'll tell whatever tale they believe will get them the most notice. But, like every tale ever told, there's always a nugget of truth - but then, what the fuck do I know?

These sadistic bastards could be playing their final game with me by messing with my head, and now, they could be playing with yours.

THE THEME FOR THESE CONFESSIONS…

Hitmen. Murder for hire. Contract killers.

People who carry these labels are simple transactionalists (is that even a word?).

One person is hired by another to kill another person or people. There's some type of agreement between these two people, thus, a simple transaction between two interested parties.

Let me ask you a question: do you believe people like this actually exist?

I mean, of course they do. We read ridiculous stories all the time of stupid people who attempted to hire a contract killer to take out their cheating spouse or some other crazy shit, right?

When I think about this, it makes me wonder about the people involved: those who take the contract to kill someone and the person who reaches out to hire these contract killers.

What makes someone so desperate to reach out to a complete stranger and pay them to kill someone who has hurt them?

What makes someone so…empty, cold, detached even, to agree to take another person's life without there being some sort of personal attachment between them?

Maybe I'm overthinking it.

In fact, I know I am. Considering where I work and the people I work with, I should know better, right?

When do people need reasons for doing anything? They don't. Not the people here, anyway.

Sometimes I'll ask why. Why kill that person? Why harm the other? Why do whatever it was they did?

They generally give me the same answer to my question.

Any guesses what that is?

Because they can. They do it because they can. Or, I guess, because they could.

Seems simple enough to me, don't you think?

The confessions you're about to read all deal with contract killers - whether they're the ones doing the killing, or they're the ones who hired someone to kill for them.

Now, the one question we need to ask ourselves is this: do we believe them?

I'd like to know your answer to that.

PATIENT: ERNEST

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

CHAPTER ONE

I've got a joke for you: if there's a serial killer in your house, where's the safest place to hide?

In the living room.

Did you eye roll or laugh?

I did both.

Ike bought me a serial killer joke book for Christmas, and it's hilarious. Not for the faint of heart and definitely not something everyone would appreciate, but when things are quiet, and we're watching the hands on the clock, I'll pull it out and start telling jokes from it.

Tonight is that kind of night. I'm killing time before I head to a patient's room. I've been asked/told/ordered to get a specific confession from this specific patient by the Warden.

This patient is a cold-blooded killer, who should have been dead a long time ago. The only reason no one tried to off him in this place is they're too afraid of him.

Or they were. Things got interesting downstairs where someone tried to prove their worth and earn a name by going after this guy, and for the first time, it actually worked.

Ernest got stabbed, but one of the guards got to him in time before he bled out. He got patched up and should have been fine if another inmate hadn't gotten to him and stabbed him a few more times in the side.

The guy is now dying. He should be dead, but like I said, he's cold-blooded, and he'll go when he's ready to go and not a minute before.

Which reminds me, I should probably hurry it up and get into his room. The Warden has promised to make it worth my time if I get the confession he's hoping for.

CHAPTER TWO

JACK

In my opinion, and this is just my opinion, but the most dangerous criminal I've met is a contract killer.

Ike and I will argue about this over and over, but I haven't changed my opinion.

Most of the contract killers I've met do it for two simple reasons: because they can and because they get paid for it. They're able to compartmentalize every aspect of their lives, including who they kill, how they kill, how many they kill, and for whom they kill.

They can also live seemingly innocent enough lives where you would never assume they were killers.

When something is a job, you look at it differently: it becomes a thing you do, not who you are.

And, I would argue that a contract killer, regardless of how many people they have killed, is not a serial killer. I'm not saying they can't become one, but for the most part, they aren't.

Here's why: they don't kill for pleasure, they kill because it's their job. The only thrill they get is in the form of a paycheck.

Every killer has a reason, right? A motivation and a drive to do what they do. For a contract killer, theirs is earning money and increasing their skill in order to earn more money. You can be sure they will do their job with efficiency because they aren't getting paid to do things messy, and they don't want to get caught.

Ernest is exactly this, and if I were an inmate downstairs, I'd be scared of him, too.

He's a cold man. Very stoic. Doesn't say much. Doesn't react too much either.

So when I walk into his room, notebook in hand, he takes one look at it and just nods.

"Guess now is the time, is it?"

I check to make sure he's secured in the bed, look over his chart, you know, the regular nurse in a patient room stuff, before I sit down.

"It's time."

Ernest isn't that old. He's maybe in his sixties. He's been here for almost ten years or so. Personally, I think he should be in a maximum prison, but I think they sent him here because he caused so many issues everywhere else.

He's an average male, with a head of hair that's starting to grey. Normally clean shaven, average build. No visible tattoos or piercings. The guy rarely smiles, from what I've seen, too.

"Which one is he wanting?"

Straight to business, gotta like that.

“You know which one.”

He turns his head and stares out the window.

“What’s it worth?”

“You also know that.” I’m here because I have to, not because I want to.

Actually, that’s a lie. His name is in my notebook as one I’ve offered a deal to. I didn’t know if he’d take me up on it, but figured since he’s a transactional type of guy, it was worth the try.

Here’s the thing you need to know about Ernest.

He’s been convicted of over thirty deaths, but for sure, there’s more we don’t know about.

The one the Warden wants specifically is the one the Governor wants.

A politician, his staff, and his family were all killed in broad daylight and without anyone noticing. They were all killed at different times and in different locations but all on the same day.

Ernest is the man they all believe hired to kill them. They’ve never been able to prove it, and they’ve never been able to figure out who put the contract on them.

That’s what I’m here to find out.

CHAPTER THREE

ERNEST TO JACK

Everyone gets so fixated on things that matter the least.

You want the politician, don't you? Why?

I could tell you more exciting jobs I took, jobs no one figured out was me.

But no, you want the boring one.

Do you know why I keep to myself so much?

Because there's nothing special about me.

I'm a boring ass man who lived the reality of my life.

It's you - you and everyone else who romanticizes it on my behalf.

I had a job to do. I did it the best I could.

The goal is to be clean, efficient, and not rush it.

Rushing gets you caught.

That's how I got caught, but you knew that, didn't you?

My last job was a clusterfuck. If it could go wrong, it did. I shouldn't have taken the job, but the money was good, and I'd already convinced myself to get out of the game. I just wanted to add more to the savings, you know?

All I wanted was to retire and live like an old man. I'd tinker with my truck, watch football in my recliner, and fall asleep with a cat on my lap.

I wanted a simple life.

What's so bad about that, huh?

Fine, let's get this over with. You want to know if I took that job and killed the politician and everyone in his circle?

Yes. It was a job. A job I was paid well for.

But that's all it was. A job. A fucking job. Why don't people get that?

CHAPTER FOUR

ERNEST

The life of a contract killer is no different than say, a plumber or electrician, or even a contractor.

It takes having a certain skill set and mastering it.

In my everyday life, I was a postman. Nothing exciting. Nothing thrilling. It was a job that paid a basic wage so I could live a basic life.

I had bills just like everyone else. My father was dead. My mother was in a care facility, and that shit ain't cheap.

There's nothing special about me. I was a boy who grew up in the Midwest. I was bored, got in a lot of trouble, and joined the army for a short stint.

When I got out, I was restless. You know how it is.

My mom got sick, so I took any job I could find - and started delivering mail.

A buddy of mine joined a private security firm after he got out. He liked it. Tried to talk me into joining, but the boss and I, well, we didn't exactly hit it off too well, so nothing came about it.

That buddy, though, we kept in touch. He'd offer me the odd job under the table between us, and I've got to say, it was fun.

The jobs weren't anything too exciting, not at first. They started off small, probably to either whet my appetite or to see how far I'd go. Cutting brake lines, planting evidence, giving someone a good rough and tumble to scare them…you know, simple enough stuff.

Between the two jobs, I had some good money coming in. I kept on top of the medical bills and lived simply enough, but bought a newer-to-me truck and stuff.

I wasn't willing to give up the job with old Sam, you know? Stay in it long enough, they take care of you when you retire. At least, that was the plan. These other stuff I took, they were just icing on the cake, money to put away for a rainy day.

My buddy kept passing on the jobs, I kept taking them.

He passed my name on to a guy who owned some dump trucks. Actually, he owned a lot, in a lot of different towns and cities. I'm not saying he was a mob boss, but he might as well have been, you know what I'm saying?

I hooked up with that guy and agreed to work on a contract basis. Sure, I had to prove myself first, that's just a given, don't you think?

I took care of some of his competition, shut up some mouthy protesters, scared off some juvenile delinquents who thought they could steal from him…anything he needed done, didn't matter what, I did, as long as he paid me.

Just to be clear - I wasn't on his payroll. There were no exclusivity contracts or nothing, you know? Once I proved my worth, I took what I wanted. If he called me up and I didn't have time, he called up someone else. No harm, no foul.

I got good at what I did. I made it a point to be clean, to be in and out, not to leave a trace behind and to leave all emotion at the door because no one had time for that shit.

I also did things alone. No partner. No help. I built a name for myself because it of it, too.

I was the ghost. That's what they started calling me, and let's be real, it was nice having a nickname.

I was the fucking ghost. In and out. Never seen. Never caught. Nothing about me stands out. Put me in a fucking police line up, and I'd never get pointed out.

Yeah, I was that good.

I was so good, that the number they gave me for my kills, it's too low.

CHAPTER FIVE

ERNEST TO JACK

Yeah, I said it.

How many kills do you think I have to my name?

Around thirty?

Who the fuck do you think I am?

Give me more credit than that, will you?

Some jobs were quick. Some took longer. Some were for one body count. Others, more. Those brake lines I cut, they weren't always just for one person in the vehicle, you know?

There are a lot of ways you can take out someone. The key is to use them all. There are guys I know who got lazy. They'd only do it if they could use a knife or a gun. Where's the imagination in that?

Here's the thing I realized early on. No one is going to love their job day in and day out. Right? You take the job because it pays the bills. Period. But, if you want to enjoy your life, you need to find some pleasure in it.

Take my post job. I was efficient. I knew my routes, knew my people, knew what was expected of me, and I out-performed everyone. That doesn't mean I went above and beyond, though. I'm not that type of guy. I clocked in, did my job, enjoyed my day, and clocked out.

These contract jobs were no different.

Sometimes the two would mesh together. I'd be on my route and took care of a contract I'd accepted at the same time.

No one blames the fucking mail man.

No one sees him either. We're the type that becomes invisible, and that always worked in my favor.

My clients didn't care how I got the job done, as long as it got done and didn't come back on them.

I was good at what I did. So good that my name would get spread around. Not 'my' name, but as the Ghost. 'I got a ghost who…' you get what I'm saying, right?

CHAPTER SIX

ERNEST

The politician wasn't my biggest job.

But you don't care, do you? You're only here for one thing.

Fine, Jack, I get it. The warden wants to eat at the fucking big kids' table, doesn't he?

Politics isn't my thing. Never has been. They're all garbage crawlers, the lowest of the lows, even if they are living the high life.

Politicians are bullies. They think they can get away with anything and everything, and they'll fuck you in the ass with the largest stick they can find and believe you should thank them for it.

They make decisions for everyone else but live by a different set of rules. That's not fair, but that's life. That's America.

I've never understood the fascination with this job. I mean, the guy was a nobody in the real world. Sure, he was in politics, but in a small ass Midwest town.

Sure, he was building a name, and apparently, there were plans to set him up for Washington, but seriously, he wasn't anyone important.

At least, I didn't think so.

He was causing problems for someone, and no amount of blackmail or threat could shut him up.

He was a pompous prick, and he should have known better. The people he was dealing with, they were dangerous folks.

A point was to be made. The guy had been warned, but he either didn't care or didn't believe it would happen.

Here's the thing - when you run in those circles and are involved with those types of people, every threat is a real one. The minute you think you're immune, that's the moment you sign your death wish.

But you know that, don't you?

You already know what the job was. To take him out, him, his family, and his staff.

Normally, that might be a difficult thing to do, you'd think, right?

Well, I'm the fucking postman, the Ghost, and nothing is too hard for me, trust me.

I don't know if I want to tell you, though.

Why should I?

I'm dying. Whether you do it or it just happens, I'm not going to last much longer.

We both know that.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JACK

I left Ernest's room.

He went quiet, turned his head, and stared at the wall. Eventually, his eyes closed.

I think all that talking plum wore him out.

It happens. It's not the first, it won't be the last.

I head back to my office, leaving my chair back in the room, and steal Ike's chair as he's doing rounds.

I want to go through Ernest's file once again. There's something nibbling away at the back of my head, but I'm not sure what it is.

He said he had bigger contracts, but nothing I read in his file earlier jumped out at me as a bigger fish than the politician.

Is he talking about the number or the person? Did he have a contract that included more people's death, or was the person bigger than the midwest politician who had his eye on Washington as a prize?

"Where the fuck is my chair?" Ike's raised voice makes its way through my closed door. I count the seconds it'll take for him to walk in here.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.

Faster than I expected.

"Why did you take my chair?" The frown on Ike's face vibrates throughout his body.

"What happened?" I'm on instant alert. It takes a lot to set off Ike, and he's on the edge; I can see it.

"Nothing for you to worry about. I just want my fucking chair." He folds his arms over his massive chest and gives me a cold stare.

"I'm giving you nothing until you tell me what the fuck is wrong." Any number of scenarios run through my head at what's bothering him.

"The wife is pissed at me for taking an extra shift downstairs, that's all." He drops his arms and sticks his hands in his pockets. "Can't seem to win with her right now. She wants to go on date nights, but then also wants to go on a big-ass vacation. I've been taking extra shifts to put towards that vacation, but she says she hardly sees me anymore."

"I told you she wouldn't like it." I hate to be the one to say *I told you so*, but…I did warn him. I'm not married to the woman, and even I knew she'd eventually get tired of being home alone all the time.

All right, I lied. I do enjoy saying *I told you so*.

"Maybe I'll cut back," he shakes his head and leaves my doorway. "I still want my chair. Unlike others, I've got shit to do." I hear him

drag one of the lunchroom chairs to his workspace, and a big ass grin fills my face.

I go back to what I was doing, trying to read between the lines, but I'm not seeing anything in Ernest's file.

I'll give him another half hour and then go back in and bug him.

That is if he's still alive.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ERNEST TO JACK

Can't a man sleep in peace around here?

You haven't been staring at me the whole time, have you? Talk about freak factor.

You get off on that stuff, or what?

[Jack here: I told him to settle the fuck down, that I left him so he could snooze]

This shit hurts. Anyway you could do something about that?

Yeah, yeah, I know the deal. Fuck. Fine.

This ain't gonna be a long spiel, I hope you realize that. I'm done ready.

And if I close my eyes again, I'm just tired all right?

Feel free to wake me up if I fall asleep again.

CHAPTER NINE

ERNEST

Homework. I hated it, but every contract needed it. Sometimes, I'd get good background info beforehand, but most of the time, I had to do my own.

Let's be real - even if they gave me the info, I'd do my own anyway.

I trust me more than I trust them, you know what I mean?

It's like being a private investigator, I didn't sign up for that shit, but someone's gotta do it, and if I didn't want to get caught or end up dead, I had to put in the work.

The wife and kids, every day around ten in the morning, headed to the park.

Now, before you say anything - a job is a job. Only someone emotionally involved lets the sex or age affect them.

Keep emotions out of it, that's the number one rule.

Well, maybe not number one. But it's in the top five for sure.

They parked in the back of the lot, where there's less vehicles, and faced away from the other vehicles which worked well for me. I waited till after they came back. Kids were whiny, Mom was frustrated. Mom went first. Then the kids. No one noticed them until way later in the day.

That was the easy part.

Next came the staff. There were only three of them, so I had to wait till they were all together. What's better than during an office lunch hour when they all had to work at their desks?

Why would anyone think the postman came with anything other than mail, right?

One. Two. Three. Down like pigeons.

The politician, well, he was the easiest of them all.

Some jobs, they come with contingencies and issues. This one was a walk in the park.

Literally. I got him in the park.

Again, no one notices the mailman.

You know how in the movies, when there's a contract killer involved, things play out during the day, with people around?

It's the best way, actually. Well, it was. Maybe not now with everything on the big wide web. Man, I had it easy in my day. I can't imagine doing it now.

Sure, the park was busy. Sure, there were people everywhere. What the fuck did I care, right? Again, I'm the Ghost. I'm invisible.

No, I didn't shoot him.

I drugged him.

While he sat on a bench, I bumped into the back of it, like I wasn't paying any attention, when really, I stuck a needle in his back.

Did he feel the prick?

Considering he held a hot cup of coffee in his hands and I bumped him hard enough to spill it, I think he was more concerned about getting his balls burned than anything.

Smart, right?

See, I knew he liked his coffee extra hot and straight black.

Homework. Hated it even as a kid, but it sure came in handy.

CHAPTER TEN

ERNEST TO JACK

See, told you there wasn't much to tell.

It wasn't that exciting of a job, truth be told.

I'd left people in the vehicles before. More times than I can count on both hands. They never get found right away.

And the staff, well, they were in a small office with a closed door since it was lunch hour. By the time people noticed anything was up, I had a few hours lead on me.

The politician just came from a lunch date with someone, and people assumed he'd been drinking, the way he walked out of the park. The guy didn't even make it back to his vehicle, but the lunch rush was over, and no one noticed him lying on the ground for the longest time.

I think it went like this: the staff were found first. Then the guy. Then, the wife and kids.

By the time the police were involved, I was long gone.

No one ever questioned me either, how funny is that.

No one, and I repeat, no one notices the mailman. It's the perfect cover.

So, does that satisfy you? The Warden? Does that earn him a place at the adults' table now?

It's what you wanted to hear, wasn't it?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ERNEST

Being a killer for hire isn't all fun and games.

You probably think so, but it's not.

It's boring work that isn't steady.

It's hard work that takes up a lot of your time.

Don't let the books and movies fool you. You can dress it up all you want and put some hot actor in a good suit in the roll all you want, but at the end of the day, it's you, your client, your contract, and your victim.

Who you work with matters.

When you work for the mafia, you've got to be careful. They bite back harder than you do.

When you work for a conglomerate, there's more happening behind the scenes than you are aware of.

And when you work for some small mom-and-pop shop business, you gotta be careful of the family.

I told you I've had bigger contracts, and I meant it.

I don't hit and tell, though. What kind of man do you take me for?

But, sure, there's some I'd like to stick it to.

I do my own dirty work, though. I don't need anyone else to do it for me.

Need proof?

Let me tell you about the cocaine dealer who had ten kilos of cocaine stolen from him. He wanted retribution. The drugs were gone, but the guy who stole them needed to end up dead.

He offered me the job, but I turned it down, so he hired someone else who did it nasty.

Not everyone thinks the same in this line of work. Some are the type to go in guns blazing, killing everyone, no matter who gets in the way.

Others, they're more particular; they have a finesse about them, and they go after who they've been contracted for, and that's it.

This dealer, he hired a guy who liked to make a mess of his work. I didn't like him.

Not many people did. When he went in, he killed a lot of people, unnecessary people.

It was a Sunday afternoon, the family had just come home from church, and they were having a big family dinner. Grandma and Pops were there. Sisters, brothers, cousins, even babies.

The guy, he gunned them all down. Not before he raped one of the women, though.

When word got out about that, I thought for sure this killer for hire would get his due. There are some lines you don't cross in our line of work, and he crossed more than I liked.

Nothing happened.

Heard about another job he took, another mess he made, and I had enough.

This was my likelihood on the line. He was drawing too much attention to it.

So I took him out. Walked right into his house one night when he had the television on. Some old country and western movie played while he slept on the couch.

I slit his throat.

The dealer, he had to go too. He was part of the problem, considering he kept hiring that guy. Now him, he was harder. He was rarely alone and always had his tattoo-covered, gun-slinging minions around him.

But I got him as he was taking a dump.

No man likes to shit with company around him, and it was the only time he was ever alone. The guy was paranoid, and I would be too. You would be, too, if you sold drugs the way he did.

I built up a bit of a reputation, and I did everything to keep it.

That's what was my undoing in the end.

Me and my ego. It's all in the files, isn't it? So what I'm gonna say isn't news to you.

I was hired to do a job. The guy wanted it done fast. A rush job.

In my head, I had only a few more left in me before I retired, and this seemed like easy money.

You know what I knew but didn't listen to? When things seem too easy, it's because it is.

Turns out, I'd made too many waves by being too efficient with what I did.

Either that or someone had a hit on me because I was too much of a threat.

It seemed easy. In and out. Cut some lines. Make sure everyone in the vehicle died. I did that. But the person didn't take the bridge like I thought they would, like I'd been told they would. So they didn't go through the guardrail like I'd planned.

This is what happens when you trust someone else's info and don't do the fucking homework yourself.

They didn't go through the guardrails and over the cliff like I'd hoped. Instead, they got into a multi-collision accident that left multiple dead, but left them alive and rushed to the hospital.

My client didn't like that I messed up. So when the police came knocking on their door because of evidence I didn't know about, guess

who got thrown under the bus?

It was my own fault. All of it.

I learned a hard lesson that day.

Since then, no one has played me for a fool.

Sure, I raised hell everywhere I went until they sent me here, because here, everyone gets lost in the system, or so I was told.

Turns out, there was nothing I could do here that a whole lot of drugs couldn't handle.

I became a pussycat in here. Not exactly the way I want to go out, you know?

At least I'm forgotten about. Guess I'm dying as a simple man, after all.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ERNEST TO JACK

That's all you're getting from me, Jack.

I'm tired.

I'm ready to close my eyes and all this to be fucking over.

I scratched your back. Now it's time for you to scratch mine.

Hope you'll remember that I've been nice, not the asshole I know you think I am.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JACK

Well, that went differently than I expected.

Regardless, Ernest is gone.

I've passed on the little information I got to the Warden. He wasn't too happy. He wanted to know who'd hired him, and that wasn't the information I got.

I could have pressed him, sure, but I didn't.

Why?

Well, sometimes I like to stick it to the big man, and I really hate always being told what to do.

PATIENT: CAPTAIN TOMMY

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Special thanks to Kristena Hodge & Lilly & Kerry Waldenmyer & Krystal Walker & IcyScythe35 for helping name those in this confession

CHAPTER ONE

JACK

Some days in the Asylum are real shit shows. Full moon, no moon, half moon, blood moon, that damn thing in the sky messes with the rhythm of this place and messes it up real bad.

It's overcast, but I know the damn thing is smirking at me.

I was not ready for tonight.

You know how it is, right? Some shifts you've got in the bag, no matter what happens, you take it with a grain of salt and keep trucking on.

Some shifts just knock the shit right out of you and mess you up bad.

This was a week of messed up fuckery and I just put in a request for some time off.

Me. A fishing rod. Silence. Sounds perfect right about now.

Especially now, because my ward is a fucking shit show.

Ike is off. I've got some crybaby interns and way too many beds full.

This is not how I like my ward - which I think by now you know.

I like the quiet. The occasional scream, taunting, banging on walls…that doesn't bother me.

Tonight, I'm bothered.

This shift can't end soon enough.

Jesse, the crybaby, is sulking somewhere. He's supposed to be doing rounds, but he got kicked in the nuts by a patient who's foot wasn't properly secured and he's off icing himself somewhere. Probably an empty room. I told him to suck it up, that we've had people actually bitten in the genital area because they weren't paying attention.

If you think getting kicked in the balls is something awful, try getting bitten there, and not in some kinky sexual experience either.

The phone rings and I've half a mind not to answer.

"Please give me some good news," I say.

"Hey, man. Got a good one coming your way. Heads up, the Warden is on his way up too."

Fuuuuccckkk.

I do not want to deal with him right now.

I do not want to take any confessions.

I do not want to prolong my night because someone is chatty.

One look on the Warden's face though, tells me I have no choice.

"Jack, put Tommy in a good room, will you?"

Tommy? As in Captain Tom?

I peer out into the hallway to see a guard standing beside Captain Tom's bed, his arms securely fastened to the rails, his gnarly feet sticking out from beneath the sheets, the restraints tight around his ankles.

Jesse is back, his nose bright red and walking like a jacked up cowboy.

"Take him to the end unit on the right, will you?" I'm nice in my request, but only because my boss is here.

Warden waits till we're alone before he leans in close. "This is one I've been waiting for. The pressure is on, you understand that, right? I need to know if there are any more victims. There's been rumors, but this is our last chance."

Sure as hell there have been rumors.

The Captain is somewhat of a legend around here. If you want a bedtime story, this is the guy to do it.

He's got stories coming out of his ass about how he makes people disappear.

Captain Tommy is one of the most notorious contract killers the South has seen…in fact, he's so famous, even though the general public might not be aware of him, authorities from Miami to New Orleans sure as hell are.

When it comes to contract killers, their numbers can be anywhere from three to thirty-three victims. Depends on their specialty and methods.

With Captain Tommy, no one knows his true numbers, except they're close to the hundred mark.

That's not a number he's claimed. Instead, it's a number that's been attributed to him by those in the know.

Everyone from the FBI to the local police departments knows Captain Tommy by name.

And so they should.

After the week I've had, this is the perfect way to end it.

"Did you get my request for time off?" I grab my notebook and refill my coffee cup with what is now way too old coffee.

"Get me what I want, and I'll give you the keys to my cottage for the week." He dangles that treat in front of me like a carrot for a horse.

Warden's cottage is on a lake. One of the best fishing lakes around, and his cottage isn't too bad either.

It's also very rare for the man to hand out his cottage keys.

"I'll see what I can do," I tell him. I try to keep the excitement out of my voice, but I do a crap job. I can tell by the smile on his face, one of pure triumph.

Some days I hate this man. Some days I like him.

Some days…well, some days, I'd be okay if one of the killers in this place got loose and went after him.

But then, some times the devil you know is better to work with than someone new, right?

I mean…not everyone would understand what I do and the deals I make, right?

CHAPTER TWO

JACK

Back in the day, Captain Tommy was a looker.

The type of looker that even straight guys are attracted to.

The guy still has it, too. He's older and harder looking now, but damn, if you can look past the wrinkles and the sneer as he gives you a once-over… not to mention the guy lost an eye at some point.

Not that I find him a looker or anything. Seriously, I can't get past that eye thing.

We've got a patch over his eye now, taped tight thanks to an infection he's got.

Looking over his papers, it's clear that's why he's up here on my floor. Somehow, he got the black fungus, an infection that could have and should have been caught but wasn't. The fungus is a nasty piece of business that travels through your nose, infects the eye socket and vessels, and then makes its way to your brain, where the end result is a fatal one.

Tommy's body is a weird one as it doesn't react well to antibiotics, and as much as he should have been sent to a hospital for treatment, let's be real.

Considering Tommy's past, he's not going anywhere.

There's a guard outside his door, and he gives me one of those deep nods that says more than any words can.

Bringing up an inmate to this floor is something most of the guards downstairs fight over. Up here, they get to relax. More times than not, I've brought in some fresh baked goods from my mom, and they always get some. Up here is the good life. Downstairs is the hell hole.

Just my opinion, but it's also the truth.

"He's in a mood," the guy says.

I glance at his badge for a name since I don't recognize him.

"Kevin. Who'd you kill to get this post today?"

His head jerks back in surprise. Guess he didn't get my sarcasm.

"I was the only one available," he says. "A fight broke out in the reading room."

I snort with obvious laughter. "Let me guess, someone took the Cat in the Hat off the shelf, didn't they?"

He looks surprised as he nods. "How did…"

"Misty guards that shelf like it's her own personal collection, and that is the one book no one is allowed to touch. Anyone ever tell you why?"

I can tell from his look he has no idea the history Misty has with that book.

Misty is an old-timer in here. She once used to be a librarian and self-proclaimed treasure hunter. She's in here because she dismembered a whole family, children and parents, because they wouldn't let her treasure hunt on their property.

"She swears it's a treasure map for some forgotten chest that once belonged to Blackbeard himself. Claims Seuss found the map and wanted to leave something fun behind for his kids. Apparently, he loved to hunt for treasure."

"Dr. Seuss had kids?"

"Step-children."

"Huh. Interesting. I'll make sure not to touch that book then." He smiles, and holy shit, the kid has one of the freakiest smiles I've ever seen in my life.

"Yeah, don't do that," I tell him.

His smile disappears, and I push open the door to Captain Tommy's room.

"Fuck, Jack. It's you?" Tommy's voice sounds like he's smoked three packs of cigarettes every day of his life.

"Who did you think it would be? The fucking tooth fairy?"

"At least that fucking fairy leaves gifts behind after it fucks you."

My brow raises at that.

"If that's an invitation, I'll decline," I say. "You're not my type."

A smile breaks out on his face. "Oh, I've heard about your type."

I roll my eyes. "And if you're smart enough, you'll keep your big fat mouth shut about anything you've heard about me," I add a hint of seriousness to my tone, which he gets right away.

"The Warden says you'll help with the pain. If you want to know, it's about twelve right now."

"Is that right? You just got hit with a shot of morphine, and it's still that high?"

He nods.

"That sucks, man. Wish I could help." The sarcasm is real as I turn to leave.

"You're an asshole, you know that right?"

I give him a shrug. "Do you think that's news or anything? Shout if you need me. I've got other things to do than to sit here with your sorry ass. You've got a guard outside who will ignore you."

I hear his chuckle as I leave the room. I head back to my office where I grab the coffee I'd left and waste time going through files in my office. I'm not in a rush. I have no choice but to go back to his room, thanks to the Warden, but I can go on my time and not anyone else's.

CHAPTER THREE

CAPTAIN TOMMY TO JACK

Nice to have you back. Figured you would.

I've got stories you want to hear, don't I?

You know, you're uglier than I remembered. Was kind of a shock, earlier. What the fuck happened to you, man?

I mean, me, sure, I've lost my looks thanks to being in this hellhole, but you…you get to live and breathe outside this place. You should take better care of yourself.

You'll regret it if you don't.

In all honesty, seeing you sure as hell is not on my 'must-do' list before I die, you know?

I remember you from downstairs. They had to hide you up here, didn't they? Was it for legal reasons? To cover their own ass?

Oh yeah, I heard about you. There aren't many of us left from those years, but we know and we remember.

That shock you? What? You think we'd forget?

Has that ever come to bite you in the ass? The fact you killed a man in cold blood? Oh, come on Jack, don't play that game with me.

[Jack here: Tommy is trying to get in my head, that's all he's doing. Feel free to ignore whatever he's implying.]

We need a give-and-take here, Jack. A give and take. You want me to give, but what am I going to take from you?

Oh, you'll make things easy, will you? You're going to do that anyway, I thought. That's what the Warden promised.

Now, now, calm down and sit your ass back in that chair. What the fuck is wrong with you?

I've got a question.

Does the Warden often make these deals on our behalf, or is he just that desperate for what I've always been willing to take to the grave with me?

I'll share it with you, but I want you to do me a favor.

Here's the give and take.

I want you to bypass that son-of-a-bitch and do what needs to be done to find the bodies on your own. Don't let that ass get all the glory, he doesn't deserve any of it.

You know this was his fault, right? Not just me losing the eye, but this fucking infection.

I say, fuck the Warden. Fuck him and his political dreams to be more than what he is.

CHAPTER FOUR

CAPTAIN TOMMY

I've got a bad rap, and for no good reason, too.

Sure, roll your eyes at me, what do I care? Believe me or not, my truth is exactly that - my truth.

No one can take that away from me.

Not you. Not the fucking Warden. Not the media. Not the cops. Not the so-called victims either.

Who I am is Captain Tommy. A captain without a ship. Sea-born but landlocked in death.

I'm a nobody now, I guess. Especially here. Between you and me, who holds the most power?

You.

We both know it.

Out of everything I've lost, losing that power, that control, that… God-like gift over someone else…well, it's been hard, let's just say that.

I was born to live on the sea. I was born to crest its waves and dive its depths, and I wish I was drowning with seawater in my lungs.

Everyone in this place calls this hell, you know that, right?

They aren't wrong.

I'm also serious when I say I was sea-born - like I was literally born on a boat, in the middle of the ocean.

My parents didn't live in a house. They didn't have an apartment where they parked their car at night, then left during the day for some mundane job in some office.

They lived on a boat and caught fish. My father sold his catch to restaurants and markets up and down the coast.

He lived the life of a seaman, and my mother swore she was a mermaid in a different life.

I always believed her.

They taught me the ways of the water. How to read the currents and the wind, what to watch for in the clouds. How to swim and not drown, how to spear fish, and set traps.

Some people head to aquariums to watch fish and dolphins.

I swam with them. They were my playmates as a child.

Unless you grew up like I did, you have no idea what my life was like. How simple it was, how extremely complex it could be.

Living on the sea is a hard life. Most doubt me when I say that, but it's true.

The worst time of my life was when I was forced to leave the boat and go to school.

That was around the same time that Mom went off to the market one weekend and never came back.

Dad put me in school for a couple of years so I could learn the basics, then eventually, he pulled me out, saying it disrupted his day too much and the life lessons he'd teach me were all I needed to know.

He wasn't wrong.

Turns out, Dad had a lot to teach me.

All the basics of what I learned in life were from my old man. How to fish. How to boat. How to fleece people and, for sure, how to kill.

Never underestimate the teachings one learns at the end of a fishing line. My skill with a knife came naturally to me, and so it should have, thanks to watching my father in action day in and day out.

Now, I can see by the yawn that you don't care about what I'm sharing, do you?

You want the gritty details.

Like where the bodies are and how many there may be.

Sit your pretty ass down, I'll get there.

You know, once upon a time, all I ever wanted was to be like my father - a fisherman. I thought that life would fulfill me. And it probably would have if that's all my father had done with his life.

Did you know my father was a killer, too?

No, I know you didn't. No one did.

He's got more dead bodies to his name than me, and all of them are buried out at sea.

No one knows about my father, but me and what I did, well for sure, I'm more famous than him.

Sure, I get that the general public has no idea about me, and that's fine.

Everyone else deserves their ignorance, and let's be real here - they really didn't want to meet me, not back then.

Let's just call it what it is - I was a killer for hire and took whatever contract I wanted, and passed by the ones I didn't.

I didn't do it for the money. I did it because I could. Because I knew what to do and how to do it, and I did it very well.

Yes, I'm proud of it.

Everyone should be proud of their skills when they are doing what they love to do.

That's what my father always taught me.

Now, let me be clear about something - the job my father and I did were different.

Dad, he was a killer, through and through.

I've no idea when he started, but I tend to think it's after my

mother left, considering ninety percent of the people he killed were women.

Me, I was a contract killer. I am a contract killer.

I didn't stop just because the police caught me - we both know that.

Hell, I even took out people here in this hellhole because the price was right.

Being a contract killer is profitable, as you can imagine.

And yes, even now, even in the end, I made it work for me.

It's all about how badly someone needs your services and how much they're willing to pay for them.

For Dad, killing became a necessity. Maybe because he felt guilty for bringing another woman on the boat and fucking her…or because he felt guilty for cheating on my mother, maybe?

For me, killing was business, and I was able to grow my business to the point where I would pick and choose what jobs I wanted.

That's the goal of every business owner, don't you think? To get to the point where you can work because you want to, not because you have to?

Let me be clear, though…I loved what I did, I never had any regrets, and I only ever took on jobs that I wanted to do.

Did that mean every job was successful?

Or that every kill was clean?

Hell no.

If that were the case, I would never have gotten caught.

CHAPTER FIVE

TOMMY

The first person I ever killed was named Dick.

I don't even know if that was his real name, but it's what Dad called him. Dick.

Dad and I were out wandering the docks. We'd come to a small town with a few bars right along there along the water and I was in the mood for a cheeseburger and fries.

Now, Dad and I had a bit of a routine by now. Sometimes, if it was early enough out, we'd eat together. Other times, he'd plant me in a booth, and he'd find a seat at the bar.

I didn't mind eating alone. Fuck, living with the man on a boat twenty-four-seven wasn't always easy. We both needed and deserved our own alone time, you know what I'm getting at?

That particular night, we found this little fish shack that boasted the best fish tacos and beef burgers.

Now…if you ever come across a fish shack that offers beef burgers, I'd advise you to find another shack.

The waitress was a pretty little thing that Dad instantly gravitated to.

I need to paint you a picture of my father.

Slim, muscled, dark tan with the blondest of hair you'd ever see. He had dimples on either side of a smile that could charm a snake, and he had this way of not only talking to a woman, but looking at her like there was no one else in the room.

Every single woman he met swooned over him.

This girl was no different.

Dad ordered a beer and whatever she recommended off the menu, as well as a burger and fries for his kid. He gave her some sob story about raising me alone after my mother took off, and that's all it took for her to fall in love.

Most women are weak when it comes to meeting a handsome, broken man.

All they think about is fixing him, healing him, being the one to mend his broken heart.

Most women don't understand that we like ourselves that way. How else would we get the girls to fall for us otherwise?

You know what I'm saying, right?

This girl, she was drowning in my father's gaze, and had no idea just how dead she was.

Her boyfriend did, though.

He came in a little while later when she was about to close up.

Something changed in the air the moment he stepped in.

The girl, who was leaning down on the bar, elbows perched tight to her breasts to perk them up, suddenly stood up straight and backed away.

I watched as Dad swiveled in his seat to look at what caused the change in his newest bedmate. He sized him up and then looked over at me.

Now, at the time, I had no idea what was going through his head. I thought maybe he wanted me to leave before a fight broke out, but at this point, I was about sixteen years old, and I'd seen more than enough bar fights in my time.

Dad's hand went to his pocket, then he gestured toward mine.

I knew right away he wanted me to get my knife out.

The guy walked up to the bar and started talking to the girl.

Dad came over and slid into the booth across from me. He told me he wanted me to prove myself and the lessons he'd taught me. Said to make it quick and do it right.

That's all the advice he gave me.

That's all the advice I needed.

Dad reclined in that booth, legs out, eating the leftover fries I hadn't devoured yet, while I slowly got up.

I had no idea what I was going to do, but I flicked that knife open and held it down at my side.

You know, I wasn't nervous. I wasn't scared shitless, either.

I think it was more of a *fuck yeah, I've got this* kind of vibe.

The guy turned, gave me one look, glanced over at Dad, and yelled out that it was closing time, then he turned and walked out the door, saying *see you at the truck, babe.*

"Sure, Dick," Dad called out, laughter in his voice.

I thought for sure Dick heard Dad. I half expected him to barrel back in through the door and go after Dad, but he didn't.

Dick didn't notice me following after him.

He pulled out a cigarette and lit it, his back still turned to me, and I'll be honest, I almost faltered for a second.

Dad taught me that if I ever got in a bar fight where I worried I'd get seriously hurt, a knife was my best option.

Do you know one of the best places to incapacitate someone?

The armpit.

Yes, you heard me. The armpit. Especially if they're only wearing a t-shirt or tank top, like Dick.

No one defends their armpit in a fight. No one thinks to.

There's a large artery in there that is close enough to the heart that if it's severed, you've done some instant damage.

Here's the deal: you've got to thrust upward with the edge of the

blade facing toward you. When you yank it out, it'll do all the damage you need.

So that's exactly what I did. His arm was already up since he was in the middle of taking a drag.

I was quick. Not as quick as I should have been because he was able to knock the knife out of my hand as I yanked it out, but it took no time for him to drop.

We were close to his truck, and I got him in the passenger side before climbing into the driver seat.

Now, let me paint the picture for you.

It was dark.

It was a small town.

There was no one around.

We were right on the water, basically beside a large enough pier.

I drove out to the end of it, where there was no one around. No lights. No vehicles. No boats.

I got Dick out of the car and pushed him into the water.

I, a sixteen-year-old kid, not only killed someone, but I disposed of the evidence, too.

I left the truck there and made my way back to the bar, where Dad and the girl were standing outside.

She couldn't understand where her boyfriend had gone.

Dad asked me if I'd seen him. I played dumb.

We headed back to the boat, Dad convincing her to join us for a nightcap.

The rest of the evening went as it always did.

I slept up on top, beneath the stars.

Dad had his fun downstairs before doing whatever he did. Sometimes he drugged them. Sometimes he slit their throats. Sometimes, he messed them up real bad.

We took the boat out, and Dad disposed of the body as he normally did.

What was his usual method? That always depended on his mood, but guaranteed he cut body parts and fed them to the ocean as a token before pushing their bodies overboard and watching their blood coat the waters.

CHAPTER SIX

TOMMY TO JACK

I made a lot of mistakes in those early days, as I'm sure you can imagine.

That's the thing about life, though, right? You make those mistakes so you can learn.

And learn I did. Dear old Dad made sure of it.

We almost got caught a few times because of me.

Dad threatened to let the police lock me up if I didn't start making better decisions in not just how I killed someone but how I disposed of their body too.

Can't force an ass up a hill, he'd always say.

I was that ass. The hill was freedom.

Eventually, I learned. I had to - it was learn or be left behind because if there's one thing you need to understand about Dad, it's this…he didn't need me.

By the age of sixteen, he considered me old enough to be on my own, and every day he kept me around, every fucking day he let me live on his boat and be involved in his life was a big fucking gift-wrapped present from him.

Nice parental figure I had, don't you think?

Not that I can blame him. Hell, in those days, most kids left the house around then, finding their own independence, right? Well…unless they kept sucking at mom's tits so they could get their schooling financed.

That wasn't me.

Could I have left, hell yeah, I could have.

But I needed a boat. Dad had the boat. He also had all the money, what little there was of it.

My choices were either play the game with the old man or work on someone else's boat and save the money till I could buy my own.

Any guesses what I did?

CHAPTER SEVEN

TOMMY

I waited till I was eighteen.

Nothing major happened to force me to leave. By that time, my old man and I had a good rhythm going, and I'd learned my lesson early on.

He taught me well. He taught me how to kill. He taught me how to protect myself. He taught me how to live passionately and as honestly as possible.

That man, he loved the water. He loved being out on it, letting life drift by, not being dictated by the clock.

Sure, we worked. We had to. But we made our own schedule, made our own life.

At eighteen, I was ready to learn more. There had to be more.

I saw all those big yachts, saw the way the people moved about, how they acted, even the staff…they lived differently.

I also saw all the coins they tossed around.

I wanted that. I was ready to stop being a fisherman and find other ways to earn money while still doing what I loved: being on the water.

Dad dropped me off in Miami. Through a friend of a friend, he got me a job on some fancy yacht with some rich ass people. We said goodbye, and honestly, I had no idea if I'd see him again.

I started off as a deckhand. The lowest position possible, doing all the jobs no one else wanted. I didn't care. I knew what I could do, and I knew I could earn my way up to bosun or even higher if I wanted.

The ultimate goal was to have my own ship.

How I got there didn't matter as long as I earned money.

Looking at this face, how long do you think I lasted as a measly deckhand? Yeah, not long. The women loved me. The men enjoyed having me around, too. I could flirt with anyone and get away with it.

I went from scrubbing decks to serving drinks in no time flat.

At that first job, a ruckus happened between two guests one night. I got in the middle and stopped it. The owner noticed and asked the right questions, and I went from serving drinks to being on the security detail.

It wasn't a bad life. The money was great. The clothing allowance was nice, too. And the man loved his boat.

I was the guy who stayed behind to watch the boat, a job I quite enjoyed if I'm being honest.

The boat was my life. I wasn't the type to go to business meetings and wait by the car. My feet belonged on the deck, swaying to the tides, feeling the breeze in my hair.

My boss…he wasn't a good guy, at least, not in your world. He ended up in jail, but before that happened, he was also known as a smuggler.

Once he knew the full extent of my skills, I became his fixer.

Being a fixer, that wasn't a bad job at all. In fact, I quite liked it. And fuck, I learned a lot about that world. More than you could ever imagine.

I took care of a lot of his problems. Most of those problems ended up as fish bait.

Well actually, all of them did.

One bloody piece at a time, too.

I also had the smarts, thanks to my old man, to protect myself so I didn't get caught when he did.

I thought for sure he'd end up dead before the police got to him.

I was wrong.

But I'd made sure I left him way before that happened. You always gotta know when to cut your losses.

Through his connections, I met others who offered to pay more for my services. I'd have been stupid not to take them up on it, don't you think?

A lot of those guys, most of them ended up dead or in prison. Not too many lived to be old men, that's for sure.

Although, not too many in my line of work last as long as I have, either. Most of us end up dead, too.

There were a couple of times I thought for sure I'd meet my maker before I was ready.

That first year, that first job, on that first boat, I was lucky I made it past the first thirty days.

Dad taught me a lot, sure, but he also put up with a lot from me.

Which meant I didn't know and understand the boundaries most other people would.

Now, I'm not sure if this one counts because I was officially a deckhand, and killing others wasn't my full-time gig…

It was after hours. I was off-shift and enjoyed a little nightcap with one of the female staff members.

The boss had a lot of company that day, people coming out to meet him miles off the coast. Most had left, and a few stayed behind.

One thing I learned early on was that if the boss had guests, my job was to remain out of sight. That hadn't been a problem until that night.

I heard a boat power up and eventually leave, which, to me, meant the coast was clear. Knowing the boss, he'd be inside his own suite, and I could crash up on a lounge for as long as I wanted, as long as I remained out of sight.

The girl and I parted ways after a little bit of fun, and I went to fall asleep under the stars.

I had this one lounger I preferred over all others. It was tucked away, off to the side and out of sight, which was perfect.

I crashed, kicked up my feet, and stared up at the sky, searching the stars for the meaning of life or whatever else you do at that age.

I heard this commotion. Someone kicked a table leg or something and muffled a curse. I half sat up, looked around, and saw nothing. Figured I imagined things. Most people would, right?

But then I heard a click flip of a knife lock, and that had me on guard right away.

I know that sound. Anyone who used knives a lot would recognize that sound.

I jumped up and crouched down, keeping my movements tight and confined. I edged out of my hiding area and noticed a man all in black hovering just outside the main bedroom suite doors on the level above me.

Well, fuck. Someone was there to kill my boss.

Now, there were a lot of things I could have done.

I could have made a commotion to let the guy know he wasn't alone.

I could have hit any numerous security buttons located around the deck to alert the boss man's team.

Hell, I could have just gone back to my makeshift bed and let whatever was about to happen play out.

Call me smart. Say, I'm quick on my toes. Think I'm an ass. Whatever you want to say, go for it. I just knew the moment was perfect for me.

So I reacted. I ran up the small flight of stairs, swung my leg out, and slid across the deck area to drop the guy to his knees.

The knife fell out of his hand and slid away.

The thud he made as he fell was loud enough to alert whoever was in that room - mainly because he fell against a chair, which in turn made its own noise as it was knocked over.

I jumped up and landed on the guy's back, knee right where it counts, and wrapped my arms around his neck.

By the time anyone opened those doors and came out, I almost had the guy unconscious.

I finished the job as they all watched me.

When I stood up, they had this dumbfounded look on their faces.

I pointed to the knife that just sat there, out in plain view, as if that would explain everything.

In a way, it did.

Bossman invited me in for a drink while kicking out the rest of the

team.

He asked what happened. I told him. He was impressed. At least, I think he was. Fuck, no, I know he was. He gave me a solid ten thousand dollars right there and then asked if I wanted to be on his security team.

I think we both know the answer to that, don't we?

CHAPTER EIGHT

TOMMY TO JACK

From the way you're tapping your pen, I'm boring you, aren't I?

What, don't you care about how I started? Don't you want to dive into the psyche of what I did what I did?

No? You don't care?

Well, fuck. Guess you are different than those mind doctors downstairs, aren't you? They like to get all feely-feely and mushy-mushy. All that 'how did it make you feel' crap.

I mean, seriously, think about the words you're saying. How do you think it made me feel?

If you think bad, guilty, or that I'd be full of regret…you'd be wrong.

Every fucking death meant I'd screwed one more person over without them knowing it.

It meant I held all the cards. It meant I was smarter, stronger, and stealthier than they were.

It meant I was better.

Hell yeah, I liked how it made me feel. Wouldn't you?

You know, anyone can kill another human being.

I'm serious.

The right circumstance, the right timing, the right weapon, the right emotion, and anyone can do it.

All you need is the right motivation.

If there's anything I've learned from all those fucking circle sessions downstairs, it's this…everyone's motivation is different, but there's always one.

Even you have one.

Don't fucking roll your eyes at me. To have you sit here, listen to me go on, and then just kill me with a plunge of your needle…there's got to be a reason.

I'm sure those psych doctors downstairs will have a heyday with you when you're caught. Oh, if only they knew that one existed within their midst. I don't know how you've pulled it off, but you've done a great job.

I mean, seriously - how do you pull it off? It's not like what you do is a secret, right? While no one talks openly about it, everyone knows about your deals.

So, how are you not locked up yet?

CHAPTER NINE

TOMMY

From one killer to another, let's have an honest talk.

Whether you're a serial killer or a contract killer, we all have one thing in common: we all have a certain style. Or method, if you'd rather.

You, you have the needle.

Anyone can kill. Do you agree with me on that?

A knife wound in the right place, a bullet to the head or heart, wire around the throat…I bet you someone's written a book on all the ways someone could kill someone, and there would be multiple volumes of it too.

My dad, he liked to chop up the bodies for fish food.

I did that, too, until it finally dawned on me that there were better ways.

I mean, do you have any idea how messy that is? To cut someone up into pieces and use them as chum?

There's fucking evidence all over the place if the cops knew where to look.

I was on my…oh, I don't know, fifth boat or something maybe, when a situation came up, and I had the right solution for it.

Does that intrigue you at all? Sure, it's an origin story if you're okay with that.

Fuck you, too, buddy.

[Jack here: there were a lot of fucks being thrown between us. He's an ass who thinks he's a king. I like to remind him he isn't.]

The Miami area is known for its free-flowing drugs. It's also known for the drug cartel that runs it.

Well, I'm assuming that's what it's still known for, and that's what still happening. I don't care how good the cops are today; you can't stop that shit, no matter how hard you try.

There's too much money in that business for it to go defunct.

This one boss I worked for, she knew her shit.

Yes, I said she.

What, you don't think women can be savvy in that line of business?

Her husband was just as bad, but she ran everything. He was basically the arm piece, the face of the business. He was the muscle, but she was the brains.

I was the fixer for them both for a good number of years. Damn, that was the life. Even when I left their employ, they still used my services, just for an increased price.

Now, the missus, she was fine. She had the body of a goddess and the sexual prowess to prove it.

The husband, he liked the show. Sometimes, he'd get involved and enjoy himself, but most of the time, he liked to watch her in action.

We had quite a few 'sessions' together, if you get my drift.

They were players in every sense of the word. The only ones they were loyal to were each other. Everyone else was expendable.

They liked to throw parties on their yacht, but when they threw the parties, we were never docked anywhere. We'd wait till all the guests were on board, then head out to open water where there were no eyes and ears.

My bosses, they weren't small-town dealers, you know what I mean? They were high up on the chain and had plans to run things one day. They were getting there, too, one kill at a time.

Let me set things up for you: they'd host these parties where deals were made and issues were taken care of. They'd always have a boat full of sexy women who liked to party, and the music would go on for hours.

There weren't a lot of issues, but they popped up here and there. Sometimes, people ended up dead in the water. Literally.

Other times, they were poisoned by their own drugs.

Here's the thing about all these 'issues' that popped up: it all depends on how you deal with them. Kill them, and that problem is over, but what if they didn't need to meet death in order to change their ways?

There's money in threats. There's a hell of a lot of money in kidnapping.

What are things people like to do in the water?

Yeah, I know it's a weird question, but answer it for me.

They like to snorkel and dive.

We always had excess diving tanks aboard. The bosses like to go down and treasure hunt in certain areas. Hell, even I liked to do it too.

Do you know what's a really good way to threaten someone?

Take a person they love, force them into a wetsuit with a tank, and watch the countdown begin on their air supply as they're submerged deep below the boat.

The boss was tired of all the blood. She was tired of how messy things got and how much cleaning was needed afterward, too. She wanted something simpler. Something that gave instant fear.

When I brought up my idea, she liked it.

What wasn't to like? Think about it. It was pretty brilliant if you ask me.

The first person to go in the suit, they ended up dead. No one took the threat seriously, which ended up being their mistake.

All it took was one. One person to die. One person to learn the hard way. One person to spread the word to the right people.

What does someone fear more than death?

The threat of it.

Some people thought they could find a loophole. They quickly figured out that when they brought a plus one onto the boat, their companion could see the suit. So they'd come alone.

Like that would make a difference.

Turn on the two-way speaker in the suit, make sure they were aware of the countdown and whether it was a bank account number or something else, deals could be made, lives could be saved…or not.

Some of these people were destined to die, regardless.

CHAPTER TEN

TOMMY TO JACK

Everyone has an end date. Don't you agree?

Mine is today.

When's yours? Any idea?

I liked being in charge of that end date, you know?

I liked knowing I held that power.

So let's get down to business, shall we?

There are some secrets the Warden wants to know. Secrets I swore I'd take to my grave.

Guess since you're helping me there, I'll tell you.

I'm ready now.

Back in the day, there were some really high-profile missing person cases that never got solved, all within my old stomping grounds. Florida really is a great place to hide bodies. Between the crocodiles and alligators, it's easy to dispose of a body.

Or you can hide them in the ocean.

How about I tell you about my first contract and the one that got me caught? The bodies were never found, and that's what the Warden wants - directions to find the bodies.

I'll play nice and give him what he wants - but remember what I said earlier.

I want you to bypass that son-of-a-bitch and do what needs to be done to find the bodies on your own. Don't let that ass get all the glory. He doesn't deserve any of it.

Still willing to do that?

That's what I thought.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TOMMY

There was one case of a seventeen-year-old girl who went missing. Her dad was the mayor of some midsize town and was quite famous. He'd made it clear he had political aspirations, so his name was well known in the papers and in the news.

This girl…let's call her Lacey.

This was one of the first 'contracts' I'd received after I left the life of working for other people.

By this time, word had spread about my services, and I'd racked up a good number of…well, there's really no other word to use than victims, is there? Maybe bodies?

So by that time, I'd racked up a good number of bodies to my count, and I was also bringing in a lot of cash. Enough that I bought my own boat, bigger than what I grew up on, that's for sure. Nicer too.

It had a lot of the trimmings that said I did well enough, you know?

So, Lacey.

The contract was to kidnap her, keep her somewhere no one would ever find her, until the ransom was paid, then return her. I was even told how much the ransom was to be, and when I heard the number, I was a little shocked. It was only a quarter of a million, can you believe it? For a kid. From a politician. I mean, when you put a price on someone's life, you'd think it would be more, right?

Any guesses who the person who hired me was?

Come on, I'll let you have three. You probably won't need them.

Yep, you guessed it. Her sweet and loving father.

It was all a publicity stunt.

She was on her way to meet her father and was on the road hitchhiking. Anyone could have picked her up, I mean, think about it. She was a seventeen-year-old girl, with long legs and a body to match.

I drove a nondescript pickup. The color was somewhere between black and green, with a hint of grey depending on how the sun hit it. It was dirty, but not too dirty. Anyone attempting to describe it wouldn't have that easy of a time.

I saw her, walking along the side of the highway. It surprised me no one else had stopped, you know? I pulled up beside her, nice and slow, and the smile she gave blazed bright against her perfect white teeth.

Fuck yeah, I still remember her. She was my first, you know? My first contract. My first stepping out on my own. My first to the

beginning of the rest of my life. So fuck yeah, I remember everything about her.

I asked where she was headed and then told her to jump in. Maybe it was my smile, my good looks, my tone, which was something between sexy and safe, or the fact it was hot out, and she was plumb tired of walking, but she jumped in.

Hitchhiking was common back then. I hear it's not so much now that people are leery of being picked up and killed.

Guess that's on me and all the other killers out there who did just that. We ruined a good thing, didn't we? Well, not for us, we benefited from our actions but ruined it for everyone else.

Anyway, I chatted her up nice, got her comfortable enough that her grip on her bag wasn't too tight, the muscles in her legs and shoulders were relaxed, and she had a hand out the window, appearing like she didn't have a care in the world. She made it easy, I'll say that much.

Now, there were a lot of ways I could have done things, and trust me, I toyed with all of them, but decided to see how far my smile and good looks would take me.

There are a lot of ways to knock someone out. A blow to the head is the easiest for me. I know others suffocate their targets and use chloroform for fast unconsciousness, but me…I'd rather hit them in the head and then tie them up.

Rather than knocking her out, drugging her, or anything else, I convinced her to come with me as I stopped at my boat for a quick minute.

The marina was closer to us than her father, and she admitted she had lots of time to get to him. It took a little convincing, but she finally gave in. I even told her she could stay in the truck and wait for me.

I played things up. We pulled up to the marina, and I got out with a huge smile on my face and said I'd only be a minute. I started walking away, stopped, then came back. It was too hot to stay in the truck, I said. Come see my boat. There's lots of people out and about, I said as I pointed toward the docks. We'll only be a minute…

Turns out my acting was good enough.

She joined me. We chatted on the way, and then I hopped up on the deck and said I'd be but a minute.

I was longer. I took my time, got everything ready, and figured she might get curious enough to come on board.

Turns out, I was right.

She came with some excuse that she was thirsty and asked if I had anything to drink.

She stood there, sun highlighted in her hair, bag slung over her

shoulder…she made it all too fucking easy. Maybe it was the short shorts she wore. Maybe she thought she could seduce me. Maybe she liked the idea of an older guy flirting with her. Who the fuck knows.

She made it way too fucking easy for me.

My arsenal of products in the hold included drugs. I added some to her drink, and it didn't take long for them to take hold. I'd say within five minutes, she was out.

I tucked her away in my cabin, making sure her arms and legs were tied up and some tape was over her mouth. She wasn't going anywhere, but I wasn't going to be stupid, you know?

I ran back to my truck, gave it a good clean to make sure she'd left nothing behind and headed back to the boat.

I took my time. Didn't want to rush getting away. There were people around, but no one paid me any attention. By the time word got out about her missing, we were long gone, out in the middle of nowhere. I was stocked up and could be out there for weeks if needed.

The girl, she was frightened, that's for sure. Scared shitless is probably a better word. I kept her bound and drugged for the first few days.

I waited for word that it was time to let her go, but that never came. What did come was crap all over the news about the father doing everything to find his daughter, and even offered up a reward of half a million. More than what we'd agreed on, and I knew I wouldn't see that extra money.

It kind of pissed me off, I'm not going to lie.

The days continued past our agreed-upon timeframe. I kept bringing the boat in, keeping things normal, as if I were just out fishing each day, and I'd wait for the marker telling me to let the girl go.

There was no marker. Just more air time on the news.

The guy was milking it and milking it good, I had to give him the props.

I just wanted my money.

I always knew what the outcome would be, regardless of what the client believed. Why else would I let the girl see my face and know where my boat docked?

Did you really think I'd let her go?

I waited two days past our agreed upon time frame and then took the next necessary steps.

Ten miles off the coast, down she went into the water. She didn't last long. She couldn't have with the weight I added strapped to her waist and how tight I bound her wrists and ankles.

I did knock her out first. I was nice that way.

I stayed there for a solid hour. I wasn't worried that she'd survive,

I just wanted to enjoy the moment and enjoy it.

I sure as hell did. Sat out on my deck with a cold one in my hand and thought about where I'd go.

I made one more pass to the coast to see if the marker was there yet. Surprise, surprise, it wasn't.

I always wondered if the father knew he'd sent his daughter off to her death.

I hope it was worth it.

The guy ended up pretty high in politics, so I guess it worked. He wanted the sympathy of the people; he preyed on their emotions, and I guess he was willing to give it all for his goals and dreams.

It says more about the man than he'd like, don't you think?

A part of me felt bad for the girl - to have a father like that, no one deserves that.

But I didn't feel bad enough to save her life, either.

Taking her was part of a contract. Her father broke it when he missed our agreed upon deadline. Her death is on his hands, not mine.

So you can tell the Warden she is, in fact, dead. I can attest to that.

Is she still there after all this time?

There was enough weight on her, that maybe…but I guess that's for you to find out.

CHAPTER TWELVE

TOMMY TO JACK

I'll make it easy on you, I'll even give you the coordinates of where I dropped her.

You look surprised that I would remember. Why?

I told you I remember everything about that contract.

I remember how I was contacted. I remember the exact wording used. I remember what type of marker was supposed to be left for me. I remember all the words that asshole of a father said on the news about only wanting his daughter back, how he'd give up everything just for another day with her.

Fucking piece of shit.

I remember the color of her eyes. The scent of her skin. The weight of her in my arms as I carried her.

I was nice and kept her knocked out most of the time she was on my boat. I didn't want a terrified girl on my boat who would scream and cry all the time, you know?

I could have killed her early, that probably would have been the smartest thing to do, but you know what? I liked smelling her in my bed.

I've kept track of the asshole. He never saw me in person, so I've never been worried about him coming after me.

Besides, if he did, he was only shooting himself in the foot, you know?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TOMMY

The one that ended me up in prison is the one I regret the most.

If there was one thing I learned, it was to stay out of someone's marriage.

I wasn't one to take those contracts - cheating spouses, deadbeat husbands, or whatever the issue - I stayed far away.

I knew too many guys who would take them, and they'd get screwed in the end.

I should have listened to myself, but I got suckered in, you know?

She was a gorgeous blond with hourglass curves. She wore hot pink lipstick, tight jeans and a black blouse.

I should have known right away she was trouble, but damn she was hot.

She came to me with a sob story, and I knew I shouldn't have believed her. I got suckered, and it was my own fault.

We met at a bar. I noticed her sitting there, all alone, drinking a glass of wine, and I offered to get her something stronger.

That was my first mistake.

She didn't accept it at first, so I left her alone. Figured she wanted space, right?

Eventually, she took me up on my offer.

Now, I was a good sod, at least at first. I didn't put any moves on her even though I didn't see a ring on her finger. She might have looked like she was there for a good time, but everything else screamed she was there to numb the pain. So I played nice. I talked with her, didn't try to feel her up, ask her out, nothing like what I could have done, you know?

Hell, I even told the other pissants in the place to fuck off and leave her alone.

When I walked to her car, she gave me a kiss on the cheek and thanked me for helping her escape for a little bit, then she left.

All I knew was her name.

And license plate.

And make of car.

Basically, I knew enough to do a search for her.

I met her at the same bar a few nights later. This time she wore a white blouse, buttons loose at the neck, and she wore a skirt. Looked like she'd just come from work, you know?

We said hello, and I offered to buy her a whiskey. She accepted, and the rest of the night went on just fine. I asked her what she'd been escaping from the other night, and she hemmed and hawed the right

amount of time before she said life.

Life. I knew right then she had troubles. I think it was from the way she said it, with a heaviness, that suckered me in.

I eventually got it out of her that she had someone in her life who was causing her issues.

I casually mentioned I might know something about getting rid of people who did that.

Normally, I never did that. I never shared who I was or what I did. I didn't need to. I'd built up enough of a reputation that people came to me.

I never went looking for work. Never went looking for contracts. Never had to pimp myself out, so to speak. And yet, that night, at that bar, with that woman, that's exactly what I did.

I pimped myself out.

That was my second mistake.

She wasn't ready to talk, I could see that. So I told her where she could find me when she was. I didn't have a landline, but I told her where to find the boat and if, by the off chance, I wasn't there, she could leave a marker for me.

That was my third mistake.

Fuck, I made so many mistakes with her. I broke all my own rules, and for what? I knew better.

I fucking knew better. Look where it got me.

It took her three days, but she finally left me that marker.

I went to the bar that night, and she was there.

That time, she bought me the drink, and said it was only fair if I was going to help her and all.

She laid it all out for me. Her ex-boyfriend wouldn't leave her alone. He stalked her, watched her place every night, and sat right outside in his car. He called her and left messages, threatening messages. He'd even have things delivered to her work. Things like flowers and other small gifts. She was a receptionist for an accounting office, and everyone there thought he was so sweet, and they couldn't understand why she wouldn't go back to him.

Those weren't sweet gifts. She said they were his way of covering his tracks. Making him look like the good guy, the nice guy, the sweet guy.

Then she showed me the bruises on her arms from when he grabbed her because she'd had to work late one night.

She showed me the scar on her neck when he held a knife to it after she'd gone out with the girls and left him at home alone.

She wiggled her pinkie finger and made sure I saw the crooked bend to it from when he broke it after she'd burned dinner.

The asshole was abusive. He had a temper.

He was also a cop.

I should have booked it then. I should have just left and moved my boat along the coast. I should have done the smart thing, but instead, I got suckered in and listened to the catch in her voice as she spoke. I watched how she'd rub her arm while she told me the story, and I believed.

I believed like the fool I was.

That was my fourth mistake.

Did I tell you how many mistakes I made with that last case? Way too many. It was my own fault I got caught.

My own fucking fault.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TOMMY TO JACK

It's way too fucking easy to look back and recognize where you went wrong, to see the mistakes you made, and to wish you could have done things differently.

We don't deserve hindsight. We should fucking learn to do things right the first time.

I knew I should have walked away. I knew it that first night at the bar when I saw her. When she declined that drink the first time, I should have moved to another chair, drank it up, and left.

Everything that happened to me after was my own fault. Every. Fucking. Thing.

Even getting sent here to this fucking institution was my own fault. Planned, but still…it was only planned because it was my last resort.

There was a hit out on me at my last prison. They moved me around so many fucking times because the body count kept rising. That last one, I almost fucking died that first night I was there.

You know how I ended up here, right, Jack?

I promised I'd give away one of my whales if they'd send me here.

Here, I knew I'd at least live till I decided it was time to die. It hasn't been an easy go of it, that's for sure, but it's been the safest place yet.

I gave them that whale, confirmed what they already knew, and gave closure to the families who still hoped for their safe return.

See, I'm a nice guy. Well, I can be when I want to be.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TOMMY

The fact the asshole of an ex-boyfriend was a cop complicated matters.

It wasn't the first time I'd killed someone in law enforcement, but it always required more work.

I told her I'd take care of the guy for her. She seemed surprised that I would offer to help her. She warned me how dangerous he was.

She said all the right fucking things.

Everything inside me was saying to stop. To walk away. To run and go somewhere else.

But I didn't. I fucking didn't, and that was my fault.

She fed me the sob story, and I fell for it, hook, line, and fucking sinker.

She wanted to know how I would do 'it', but I didn't think she could stomach the news.

I told her not to worry about the details and that the less she knew, the better.

I also told her that after tonight, we could never see each other again. That was for my protection - once a cop dies, the hunt for the killer is extensive. They'll have eyes on her, and if they see her with me…I'm screwed.

She tells me tonight is the only time to do it - tonight was his poker night, and he always came home drunker than a skunk.

A drunk cop is better than a sober one - at least in my case.

She gave me his address, kissed me on the cheek, and then I left the bar.

I waited for a bit. Needed to give the asshole time to get home and open another bottle. I waited outside his house. He kept the curtains open, so I could see everything.

I saw him walk to the kitchen. I saw him sit on his couch, beer in hand. I saw him fall to the side, like he'd fallen asleep.

That's when I made my move.

It didn't take much to get in the house. It's like he left the door open just for me, you know?

Well, actually, that's exactly what he did. I should have clued in.

I held my fishing knife in one hand and quietly made my way over to the couch, where he lay in a really uncomfortable position.

I should have paused. Instead, I reached out with my knife and went to slice his throat - except I wasn't cutting through skin, I was cutting through fucking fabric.

Before I knew what was happening, my head was pushed down

onto the couch, arms cuffed behind my back, and rights being shouted at me.

I was fucking surrounded by a team of cops who were waiting for me.

For me, specifically.

I'd been set up, right from the beginning. By the time some cheap ass lawyer came to see me in jail, they'd already had a team processing my boat, and of course, they found enough to throw the book at me.

Fuck, they even found all my souvenirs. My dad told me never to keep anything, but I had to. For my own selfish reasons. Locked away in a box on my boat, I kept something from everyone. Whether it was a piece of jewelry, sunglasses, their wallet, keys…I wanted it for my own count, you know?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TOMMY TO JACK

That one ended up sealed, any idea why?

Turns out, the cop I was trying to kill was nasty in his own right.

See, once I saw his face, I knew right away who he was.

I'd had dealings with him in the past. Not only was he on the take with one of the big drug runners out of Miami, but he'd also paid for my services to take care of a few issues for him.

Police, even back then, didn't have that good of a rap sheet, and they'd just busted a few of the cops on their payroll for being dirty.

Guess this was too much for them to handle, so to cover it all, they had to cover me.

Get it?

I still went to prison, obviously, but I had certain…benefits, I guess you could say.

Once a contract killer, always a contract killer. Even in prison.

In prison, you might not get paid in hard cash, but you get paid in other ways. I always made sure it was worth my time, you know?

Life hasn't been too bad. The only thing I miss about my freedom is my boat, truth be told.

Ever been on a boat, Jack? You should demand some extra cash from the Warden for your stories and buy one. Hell, leave this fucking place and get lost on the water.

It's what I'd do if I had the chance.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JACK

Captain Tommy died not long after I left his room.

I didn't sit with him and wait for that last breath. I let him die alone, like he deserved.

His story was shitty. Not much to it, actually. He bragged more than anything, and I was bored out of my skull, to be honest. Plus, did he really reveal much? No.

So why am I sharing it with you?

Well, he did give me the coordinates, and I did let the authorities know.

Some good came from his death, at least.

It took a while… as he said, the ocean currents tend not to play nice at times, but they found some bodies. More bodies than he whispered in his last moments.

Fucking asshole killed a lot of people. He didn't deserve the comfort of not being alone.

Agree with me or not, that's how I felt then, and I haven't changed my opinion either.

PATIENT: SHANNON

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Special thanks to Shannon Dean & Candice G & Kimberly & Shinodarely & Cheryl for helping name those in this confession

A quick note: as you read Shannon's confession, keep in mind that some people need a little prodding when it comes to telling the truth.

CHAPTER ONE

JACK

You've heard of the black widow, the green widow, and the red widow, I'm assuming.

If not, look them up. Here's the basics: the Black Widow is all about death. The Green Widow is all about the money that comes from death. The Red Widow is all about the blood that comes before death.

We've had enough of those widows in this place, I could probably dedicate a whole book to their confessions.

Maybe I should.

This one widow could be in both books, but since she was the client and the killer is dead…she fits in nicely here, I think.

The floor is boring tonight. Most of my patients are on ventilators and comatose, so there's nothing exciting happening with them.

Rather than force pointless cleaning on the staff tonight, I'm in the mood for ease and comfort, so as long as they do their rounds and don't karaoke in the lunchroom, I won't give two shits what they're doing - or who they are doing if that's the case.

The Warden is on holiday for a few more days, so it's like the whole place has shut down, and we all don't give two fucks what happens. As long as no one dies that shouldn't be dying, and we've got no new intakes - it's an easy week for everyone here.

The phone rings and I'm half tempted to ignore it.

Actually, I do. Ike is sitting out at the front desk and he can answer the fucking thing.

He gets it on the third, mumbles a bit, chuckles a little more, and then I hear the squeal of the chair as he pushes it back.

His thump-thump-thump of heavy footsteps announce he's coming to see me.

"We've got a visitor tonight, and she's a Chatty Cathy." He pokes his head into my office and grins as I groan at his announcement.

"Who is it?"

"She's one of the Shannons." As if that says it all.

I mentally go through the list of inmates downstairs and count up the Shannons we have. I already know it's not the lone male Shannon who spends more time in isolation than in his own cell. That leaves three women, and they're all a little batshit crazy if you ask me.

One can't really talk, she just stares at the wall and mumbles all day. She's lost in some world of her own making and prefers that to reality.

The other Shannon is a new arrival, and unless she pissed someone

off and got shanked, she shouldn't be up here yet. I haven't met her, only heard about her. She kidnapped delivery drivers by tasering them, locking them in her basement, and forced them to eat dog food.

Nasty shit, that one.

I'm really hoping it's the other *other* Shannon. Not the kidnapper or the mumbling one. I hope it's the widow.

That Shannon is someone I'd love to chat with.

She's not a black, green, or even red widow. She's all of them combined. A goddess in her own right, and I've been waiting a long time for her story.

CHAPTER TWO

JACK

While Ike prepares her room, I go through her chart to see what's going on.

She's an old lady dying naturally. Her organs are shutting down, and they've done all they could do to help her downstairs. She's coming up here for end-of-life care.

Widow Shannon and I have already had our little chat. Actually, we've had several chats throughout the years. I've seen her age, and even now, even being in here without all her beauty products, she's one hell of a looker.

There's something about her eyes that just draws you in. It's mesmerizing and seductive all at once, and let me tell you, being seduced by an old woman looking like her is every young male's dream.

The two of us, well, we could have had fun together if I'd been born a little earlier and she hadn't been caught.

I'd probably also be dead, but she probably made it worthwhile, if you know what I mean.

By the time Ike makes it back to my office, I'm counting down the time for her to arrive.

I'm going to enjoy this talk.

"Mind if I greet her?" Ike fills the doorway, arms crossed over his massive chest, his question is more like a statement than anything else. "You'll just monopolize her later on."

Which is true. I don't care how much she wants to chat, I'll stay by her side throughout it all.

Hell, I'll even stay by her side for a bit when she's gone, to say a proper goodbye.

Does it sound like I have a little crush on her?

She's old enough to be my fucking grandmother, so get your mind out of the gutter.

But maybe, just maybe, I do.

Every other male in this place sure as hell does.

I know firsthand that she gets all the special treatment. She may give off those old women, frail-and-fragile vibes, but she's got us all suckered.

I'm man enough to admit it.

She's got a nice liner on her mattress, extra sheets on her bed, fuzzy slippers for her feet, a plush housecoat, a nice bum pad for her wheelchair, and gets hand-served her meals, too.

No one minds. At least, if they do, they know to keep their mouths

shut.

Widow Shannon wields a lot of power on her floor, and she knows it. Does that mean she takes advantage of it? No. At least, that's never the vibe I got. She always comes across as grateful and even a little surprised at the extra treatment.

Does that mean she'll share the love with other inmates around her?

Only if it's beneficial for her. Come on, she is here for a reason. Don't let her fool you.

It's something I often have to remind myself whenever we have our little chats.

CHAPTER THREE

JACK

Some people have careers that don't feel like jobs. They may not be excited to get up and go to work every day, but they also don't dread it either.

When they think about the rest of their lives, they feel content, happy, and satisfied with where they are and what they are doing.

They're not looking for better opportunities or even a career change because they're doing what they want to be doing.

Other people have careers that are soul-crushing. They go to work because they have to, in order to pay the bills, but they're always searching for that 'something better'. Their career isn't their passion. Their career is just their job. A job they hate, but they're on autopilot, going through the motions.

My career is somewhere in between.

This hellhole of a place is soul-sucking, mind-numbing, a drain on every energetic cell within my being. And yet…there's no other place I want to be.

How crazy is that? Don't answer that.

I'm walking through the halls of my floor. I see every single crack in the wall. I notice every single stain on the walls and the floors. Every sound I hear, I can name because I know this place inside and out.

I also smell shit. I can't decide if it's just the permeated smell that's always here or if it's fresh.

I fucking hate fresh shit, you know?

We've already dealt with the fact it's haunted. You and I both know there are ghosts in this place that apparently follow me around. Do they come home with me or stay here, I have no fucking clue. Nor do I want to know, *thank-you-very-much*.

I feel like I know the soul of this asylum. I am this asylum, and this asylum is me.

So, as I walk down the hall toward Shannon's room, I feel an energy surround me, and I know my floor is happy Shannon is here.

Sounds crazy? Fuck yeah.

Ike walks out of Shannon's room, closing the door behind him, whistling a snappy tune.

He's happy.

"What would that wifey of yours think about all this?" I wave my hand in a circle toward him.

"Oh, she knows all about my crush on Shannon," he says with a wink as he slaps me in the arm. "She doesn't blame me, and we even

do a little role-playing sometimes." His brows wriggle as he chuckles.

I pretend to gag.

I'm not actually pretending. That's some fucked up shit right there.

"Damn, you're easy to get, aren't you?" He shakes his head as he walks past. "She's got her warming blankets, in case you wanted to order me to do that for you, like usual." He calls over his shoulder.

Fucking asshole. I give him only silence because I know he's looking for a reaction.

Working with your best friend can be fun. It can also kick you in the ass, and I know he's been waiting to use that one for a while.

I'm about to give the door a slight knock and notice a new stain on it. What the fuck?

"Hey, big dog," I call out before Ike turns the corner.

He stops and turns. I wave him down.

"Did Touchy Tony get out of his room this morning?" I point to the smear of obvious shit.

Ike grumbles, then walks down to the end of the hall and proceeds to look at all the other doors and walls.

"Well, fuck. I had the newbie make sure he was secured in his bed."

Touchy Tony is the only one on the floor who could be the culprit unless it's the newbie himself.

I mean, we've had staff that have gone crazy working here. It happens. This place can be too much for some people.

"Check on that, will you? And then get the newbie to clean all this shit up and make sure it's not anywhere else, yeah?"

I watch where I put my hand and push the door open, adding a smile to my face, one that is definitely not forced.

"It's about time you're here, I've been waiting."

CHAPTER FOUR

SHANNON TO JACK

I feel like I've been waiting for this moment forever. I finally get you all to myself, and it's like a dream come true.

I wish looked better for you. I'll admit I'm not feeling the best right now.

I never knew what it would be like, you know? At the end.

How would I feel? Would I be ready? Would I look back at my life and have regrets?

None of that really matters now that I'm here. I'm a little disappointed, I think, that I'm not full of misgivings and questions.

Life is life. What's happened has happened, and there's absolutely nothing I can do now to change any of that.

I have lived a full life. I've been happy, loved, fulfilled.

I've also made a lot of mistakes. I reacted when I shouldn't have. I moved when I should have stood still. I made decisions without thought, and I've made decisions I know I shouldn't have.

But you know what? I have no regrets. Zero.

Because every choice, every decision, every mistake meant a new experience.

I lived my life, Jack, the best way I could.

There's nothing to regret about that.

Well…maybe I do have one regret: that we didn't meet sooner.

CHAPTER FIVE

JACK

"I bet you flirt like that with all the guys?" I move my chair closer and notice how she winces at the squeal. "What did you say to Ike while he was here?"

She blushes a little. "Was he smiling when he left?"

"Widest smile I've seen in ages." I lean forward in my chair, elbows on my knees, and stare into her eyes.

"Well, that's between him and I, don't you think? You wouldn't like it if I spilled all our dirty little secrets, would you?" There's a twinkle in her eyes that's contagious.

Damn, this woman is fine. I can't even imagine what she was like when she was younger.

"If our secrets are dirty, you can spill them all you want. Everyone would just be jealous, trust me." I add a little wink, which has her chuckling.

"Let them be jealous. A little jealousy never hurt anyone." A twitch of a smile plays on her lips as she looks off to the side. "Well, I guess it can kill if you let it go too far." She folds her hands in her lap and leans her head back against her pillow. "Here for my little chat?"

Shannon doesn't look too good, but then, no one ever does when they're here with me.

"Are you up for it? I'm not really sure it will make much difference."

Her eyes close for longer than I'd wanted, and just when I'm sure she's fallen asleep on me, she looks at me, and I can see the pain in her eyes.

I reach out, not quite touching her, but close. "There's honestly no need," I say.

Would I like to hear a story she hasn't told me yet? Hell yeah, I would.

Do I need to, that's the question.

No. If she's ready to go, I'll help her go. That doesn't make me a bad person or an evil person, it means I'm easing someone's suffering - and isn't that something we all should do as basic human beings?

"Why don't you go get a fresh cup of coffee and come back," she says. "Ike said he'd put on a fresh pot for you, and I'd really love to smell it one last time, if that's okay?"

Not about to make the woman beg, I do exactly as I'm asked. I give her a look before I close the door, and her eyes are already closed, her head turned to the side.

To be honest, I'm not even sure she'll be alive when I return.

Ike's standing at the coffee machine, and he's pouring himself a rather large cup of coffee.

"Sure hope you left me some." I grab my mug, reach up for some JD, and pour a splash into the coffee.

"Drinking on the job is a sure way to get fired," Ike says as he waves at me to pour a dash into his own cup.

"Guess we'd better keep it a secret then."

If I'm going to get fired, it's not for this. It'll be because I've pissed Warden off enough that he's ready to drown me regardless of the consequences. We both hold each other's death wish, I guess you could say. I know way too many of his secrets for him ever to give up mine.

"She's not doing so good, is she?" Ike takes a sip of his coffee and lets out a little sigh. "Yep, that's perfect."

I just give my head a shake. "If she's alive when I return, I'll be surprised. Deal with all that shit yet?"

"Stupid newbie did a piss ass job securing Tony, so he's cleaning all the shit. Told him I want the place smelling like roses, or he'll be on diaper duty for the whole month."

I snort. "He's on diaper duty as it is, not sure that's much of a threat."

"Yeah, but he doesn't know that."

I take my coffee and head back down to Shannon's room. I give the newbie a strong stare as he cleans shit, before I knock on Shannon's door and push it open.

CHAPTER SIX

SHANNON

Ahh. I could smell that coffee as you came down the hall.

I used to be addicted to the stuff. That addiction carried over to prison, but the stuff they serve in these places is nothing compared to the real stuff. I swear ours is mixed with some dirt - all to keep costs down, right? Tell me, would you drink the stuff they offered downstairs?

No, I'll answer that for you. You wouldn't. That's why you brought your own coffee maker to work, and you even bought your own grinds, am I right?

Once you've had the good stuff, it's hard to make do with the crap.

I eventually stopped drinking it after all the gut rot. It just wasn't worth it. So, I switched to tea. Some of the guards would slip me their tea bags, and if you let it steep for long enough, it'll do as a substitution.

But, oh, back in the day…the first thing I'd do was make a strong cup of coffee before I attempted anything else. It didn't matter how rushed my day was, it didn't matter how early or late I was up, it didn't matter what was going on in my life - I never skipped out on that first cup of coffee.

My mom let me have my first sip when I was barely a teenager, and I was hooked.

I've never had many addictions in my life, but coffee was always at the top of the list.

Oh, you want to know what the others were. Hmmm…well, that's easy enough.

Coffee. Lipstick. Mascara. Bonbons from the local sweet shop, and love.

You would never have seen me without mascara and lipstick on my face.

The bonbons were something Zach, my first husband, got me hooked on. We had a cute little sweet shop in town, and he'd surprise me with boxes of them - just a little *I love you* surprises. Sweet and cute, right?

Of all my men, he really was the best. There's something about that young love that melts the heart and blindfolds you to the reality of life. Sure, life was hard, but we had each other, and nothing else really mattered.

I thought my life would be easy with him. We both worked good jobs and lived in a cozy little bungalow overlooking a river. We'd have friends over for picnic dinners, we both rolled up our sleeves to do

renovations on the house, and we would go for weekend drives and be that young couple so full of love.

I pictured us having our three children, him teaching them how to ride bikes, and me having our girls help bake in the kitchen. We'd have a happy and loud home full of laughter and craziness while we grew old together.

Sadly that didn't happen. Zach died too young. Before we could have children, before our hair would turn grey, before we'd be that couple walking down Main Street, him with a cane, me leaning on his arm, neither one of us hearing the other but still giving each other those googly eyes of love.

He dropped dead one afternoon as he was painting the living room. There was no lead-up, no symptoms of pain; just one minute, we were laughing about something ridiculous, and the next minute, he was on the floor, dead.

My whole world stopped right then. I was a widow before our first anniversary.

I wasn't sure how I could continue - he was my everything, my light and support, my rock and shelter. Thankfully we had a slew of friends who supported me and wouldn't let me lose myself to the dark abyss of grief. They made sure I got out of the house, inviting me out for dinner and drinks and showing up at my place for impromptu lunch dates. They also helped me redecorate, refurbish, and buy a new wardrobe after the insurance money came in.

If I was going to survive my heartbreak, I needed to create a new life for myself. That money helped me do that.

It also helped me find my next husband.

Funny how that happens.

We had a whirlwind of a romance, I guess you could say.

Gregory saw me sitting alone at a table at a restaurant that overlooked the water. He asked if he could keep me company, that seeing a beautiful woman like me by myself with a smile on my face was heartbreaking.

Our love was fast and strong, with a sense of passion that took my breath away.

When we got married, I moved in with him, keeping my little bungalow as a rental unit. Every girl needs to have her own cash, don't you think? He made enough money that I didn't need to work, which was nice but also boring.

I wasn't used to being at home all day, but it didn't take long to find new friends within his inner circle, and they knew how to keep me busy. We would have long, boozy lunches, go shopping, and even start volunteering at local community events.

He never wanted children, and that was okay with me. I'd let that

dream die and buried those dreams and desires along with my first love.

We were married for a little over two years before he died in a boating accident. It was horrific and heartbreaking. Three men on that boat all died, leaving three widows to grieve without understanding what happened. They went out one morning to fish and never returned. There was no major trauma on their bodies once they were found, and the official certificate of death stated death by drowning.

Twice a widow. The second time was just as hard as the first, if not harder. I started doubting myself, doubting if I was enough. Why was God so dead set against me being happy?

I stayed in our gorgeous home for a year, but it was too much room for one person, so I eventually sold it for a nice profit. That, along with his life insurance payout, along with the rent from my bungalow, and the money I still had from my first husband, set me up quite nicely.

I didn't want much in life, I just wanted to be happy. Is that so wrong?

To me, happiness means being loved by someone else. I didn't want to be alone in life, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that.

After a year of grieving, of wearing black, of learning to live alone, I decided enough was enough.

It was time to do what most other women in my state would do…I decided to travel.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SHANNON TO JACK

Do you travel much? Have you ever just wanted to get away, explore the world, and see life through the eyes of a different culture?

No, don't answer. I remember you once telling me your happy place was on a dock along a river bank with a fishing rod in hand. Or was that someone else?

I'd always had an urge to travel, a desire that seemed unreachable. With my first husband, he had no desire to travel beyond our country. In fact, he had a fear of flying, and rightly so. As long as we could drive there, he was fine. Even if it took days or a week, he'd be game. But ask him to get on a plane and he balked.

My second husband loved to fly. He would book us first-class tickets, and we'd fly anywhere and everywhere we could. He loved to put his feet in the sand and relax or lace up his shoes and go for walks through old town centers in Europe. He especially loved renting those fancy cars and driving through the Italian countryside.

He spoiled me, which, let's be honest, I was okay with that.

I wish that spoiling could have lasted longer.

When I decided to travel, I gave myself a year. For a year, I was willing to live out of my suitcase and explore the world - as long as it meant never returning home.

I really didn't have a home anymore, I guess.

My plan was to travel Europe for a few months, come back to the country and visit different regions, then go back to Europe. On each visit home, I would keep an open mind and try to find a place where I would fit in.

It didn't matter if it was New York or New Orleans. Charleston or Chicago.

I liked my new lifestyle. I didn't have to worry about money. I was set for life, I guess you could say. I could have lived single, been alone, but that's not who I was, or even am.

I need someone to love. I need someone to love me.

I found that someone while in Paris, of all places. The city of love and lights became the city of my heart.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SHANNON

Ahh, Paris. It's magical and old and everything you think it is and more. I can't describe how I feel about that city in a way that makes you understand just how important it was to me.

I'd never been. That was a city on our list to visit, but my husband died before we could make any travel plans.

I stayed at one of the top hotels in the city. Mainly because I was alone and because I knew it was where my love would have wanted us to stay. They treated me like royalty there, always welcoming me as I walked through the doors, sending tea up in the afternoons and adding extra macarons for me, making sure I had the best reservations and tours and even tickets to the Opera.

My husband couldn't spoil me, so they did his job for them, and oh, it was so lovely.

I met my last husband at the Eiffel Tower.

I was having a champagne picnic with the tower as my backdrop. Yes, I was alone, but that didn't mean I was lonely. I never felt lonely that whole time, how could I?

When you walk down the streets and enter all the amazing shops, everyone says bonjour. Everyone asks how you are and how they can help you…everyone is so polite and friendly, and if you take the time to talk with them, to show interest in them as a person and not just for what they can do for you, it's amazing how people will open up.

So, I'm having my picnic, sipping my champagne, eating my macarons and chocolates, and someone comes and blocks my view of the tower.

It was a fellow American.

He saw that I was alone and wondered if he could join me. He said no beautiful should be alone in Paris. How could I turn down an offer after that?

He was a handsome man with silver hair and an award-winning smile. He could have been an actor, one of those suave men who woo women as they plant a kiss on the inside of their wrists.

Like me, he'd lost his wife. Like me, he was here because it was something they'd once talked about doing. Like me, he was staying at my hotel.

Now, I know what you're probably thinking, that this was all planned and I was being naive.

I don't know why you would even think that, to be honest.

Meeting Phillip was the best thing that ever happened to me. I couldn't have planned it better myself, if I do say.

Everything aligned for us. The fact we were both in Paris at the same time, staying at the same hotel, both in the same part. Paris is a large city, and the amount of people just at the Eiffel Tower alone means the likelihood of us meeting was minuscule.

And yet, meet we did.

Having both lost someone we loved, I think we were both a little hesitant, a little fearful, and very cautious about losing ourselves to love again.

I know I was.

I had all my walls bricked into place, and there was no way I was allowing myself to get hurt like that again.

Losing yourself in grief is easy. Climbing your way up through that grief, having to tear apart the walls you've built with your bare hands, that's the difficult part.

Little by little, over a glass of champagne, discovering a new patisserie, wandering through the streets with my arm through his, we somehow fell in love.

It was beautiful. It was also fast.

Having known what it meant to lose someone you loved, we both agreed that we weren't willing to lose any more time, so we rushed home, got the paperwork done, and got married in city hall where Phillip lived. Friends of his stood as our witnesses, and we celebrated on his yacht that night.

Now, normally, this is where you settle down, learn how to live as a couple within the confines of the same four walls, and do everything you can to woo his friends to your side.

Except, we decided time wasn't our friend and we wanted to explore the world together, to experience and live as much as we could, never taking tomorrow for granted.

His friends didn't like it, that's for sure.

Oh, the things they said about me…quite slanderous when you think about it. Not that I blame them. Sure, they called me a gold digger, but they didn't know me. All they knew was that Phillip had brought home a stranger he'd met in Paris.

I understood and didn't hold it against any of them.

But I was also happy when we boarded his personal jet and flew to Italy.

Oh yes. Little ole me. On a personal jet. I'd married up and married well, that's for sure.

We honeymooned in Capri. We sailed the Mediterranean and swam in its blue waters. We pretended we were Gods and everyone else our underlings. We made mad passionate love and couldn't keep our hands off each other.

It was wonderful.

I still dream of those moments. It was probably the happiest time of my life, and every time doubt would climb in, I'd push it away. Phillip and I would grow old together, I knew it in my heart.

CHAPTER NINE

SHANNON TO JACK

I knew I was special, Jack. I knew I was special and I never took it for granted.

Most people only get to love once in their life. They love, and then they settle, always looking back with regret, wishing they'd listened to their heart and didn't let their true love get away.

But I was able to love three times.

I was able to love and be loved, and that's not something most people get in life.

It's a gift. One I've never taken for granted.

I'm also not stupid or naive. My life wasn't hard. It wasn't difficult.

I didn't live paycheque to paycheque. I was lucky that I didn't have to. I was fortunate that Zachary, my first husband, was a banker and had a life insurance policy. If he hadn't, I would have been like everyone else, having to work for the rest of my life just to pay the bills.

I was lucky, and I knew it.

Finding Gregory and falling in love with him was a dream come true. He made me feel like a princess.

But Phillip…Phillip made me feel like a queen. And not just any queen, but The Queen of his world, and I loved it.

I was spoiled.

Being the international businessman he was, Phillip traveled the world and held meetings with the most influential people in the world. He dabbled in politics, never wanting to hold office, though.

He once told me the real people with power were the puppet masters.

He was a puppet master, and the politicians danced to his strings.

He taught me a lot, truth be told, and what he taught me is probably why I've survived this long in prison.

I lost him too soon, Jack.

I wasn't ready. But then, are we ever?

CHAPTER TEN

SHANNON

My marriage to Phillip wasn't everything that I thought it would be, but it was better than it could have been if that makes any sense.

That passion never disappeared; it was always there, but I had to learn to adjust my way of thinking when it came to living within Phillips's life.

My husband mixed business with pleasure all the time. He had to. He didn't take days off, but he had days when he didn't have to focus so much on the business, and he could relax.

When he relaxed, I became his focus. My happiness was his happiness. He worshipped me and my body in ways no one ever had before, and I made it enough.

I had to. I didn't want to become one of those women who had everything and yet were so miserable. That was just not me.

So, I built my life around his so that when he had downtime, I could accommodate him but still remain active and social at the same time.

I became indispensable within his world, a part of it, someone people expected to see when they were around. That was my goal, and I did it well if I do say so myself.

I became someone, and until then, I didn't realize that was something I ever wanted with my life, you know?

I knew I wanted to be someone important to the person who loved me, but I didn't know that I had it in me actually to be someone.

I know Phillip appreciated it. He said so quite often about how he appreciated just how easily I fit into his world.

Well, of course I did. How could I not?

We had a lot of security around us, did I mention that yet? Everywhere Phillip went, he was never alone.

That was probably the hardest thing for me to adjust to - being watched all the time, never truly having my own space, and being accompanied everywhere by his security team.

Little old me having a bodyguard…even now, thinking about it, it seems crazy.

Phillip's work, however, made it necessary.

People often wanted my husband dead.

He sat me down once to explain it to me after I questioned the need. On several occasions, especially while traveling overseas, there were times he didn't think he'd make it out alive.

I couldn't imagine someone wanting to kill Phillip, not until I realized he truly, indeed, was a puppet master of many.

He lived in a dangerous world. I was so scared I'd lose him. That was probably why I didn't struggle with rearranging my life to fit into his. We truly didn't have time on our side and I wanted to make the most of it while I could with him.

Obviously, we didn't have much time together.

Five short years. That's all we had. It wasn't an easy marriage, but it was an exciting one. Something was always happening, we were always jet-setting off to somewhere, and I never felt like a second wheel.

Phillip never asked me to stay home while he traveled the world. He always wanted me with him, and I never said no.

Of all the men in my life, losing him proved to be the most challenging. For five years, my life revolved around him. Who was I after he was gone?

There was one trip that I didn't go on with him, and if I had, things might have been different.

He might still be alive.

I wouldn't be lying in this bed dying with only you as my company.

My husband was found in bed with his throat slit while I worked at a charity event back home. When I was told the news, I collapsed.

My whole world is gone.

A widow, once again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SHANNON TO JACK

What's wrong, Jack? Why are you looking at me like that?

[Jack here: I let Shannon talk, to tell me the story of her husbands and how they died for one simple reason. Because that was her truth that she's stuck to for all the years. It's a boring story, though, don't you agree? One woman, falling in love with three different men, who all happened to die suddenly, leaving her filthy rich…booorrrring. Now it's time for her to tell the truth, the real truth and I've said exactly that to her.]

The real truth makes me out to look evil and nasty and nothing like who I truly am. That woman then isn't who I am now, surely you see that?

Why are we defined by the mistakes we make?

Isn't it enough that I'm here, having lived the consequences of my actions, never once complaining?

I made a vow that I would change, that I would be different, that I could be my true self and that's what I've done.

Telling what really happened, instead of what I wish had happened, changes nothing except the narrative that I'm more than happy living.

Don't you like me as I am now?

So why force me to live in the ugliness of the past and the mistakes I made?

The person I am right now is a good person, Jack. Please remember that.

[Jack here: she's now in tears and I feel guilty for forcing the truth from her. I believe her when she says she's a different person. But who she is now doesn't erase who she was, no matter what story she tells. Besides - her true story is the whole reason she's here.]

Fine. You want the real stories? They're not pretty and they'll change your mind about me, but don't say I didn't warn you.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SHANNON

My first marriage was horrific.

We married right out of high school. Not because we were sweethearts or soulmates but because I was pregnant, and my parents threatened to kick me out of the house if I didn't make him step up and marry me.

It was a shotgun wedding at the town hall followed by a drink fest around a campfire out in my parents' field.

Everyone was drunk except me.

I didn't even wear a wedding dress.

My mother gave me her best hand-me-down date night dress she'd wear when she and my father went out for dinner. They lived out in the country, so it's a safe bet to assume I grew up with no money.

In fact, I was the girl who lived on the wrong side of the tracks.

Zachary, well, he wasn't a football player, but he was popular. Our romance was more of a fling than anything else, but his parents were important people in our town, and my parents were skilled at causing scenes, so when my daddy met with his daddy, they came to some sort of agreement that had nothing to do with us and everything to do with keeping the peace.

I was five months pregnant when we said our vows. We moved into one of the rental properties his parents owned, and Zachary went to work at the bank for his dad while I played house.

Our life wasn't fun and games. We didn't have friends over for picnics or go antique hunting on the weekends. Zachary had his drinking buddies over, and I'd be the one cleaning up afterward.

It's safe to say that Zachary didn't appreciate being forced to live a life he didn't want.

He had big plans, and I ruined them, according to him.

He had wanted to go to college, get a degree like his big-shot father, and become partners, ruling the town and being a 'somebody'.

Thanks to me, he has to earn his way up the rank now, learn the business on the fly, and prove himself to his father.

Zachary would come home at night, and all he'd want to do was drink.

When he was drunk, he did what most drunk men forced into a marriage would do: he took his anger out on me.

At first, it was bruise-biting grips on my arms or legs. He especially liked to see the marks on my thighs.

Those grips would become pinches and then punches. Once he realized the right spots to make his mark, where the world couldn't

see but he could…he got off on that.

It was all about control - and him hurting me, him marking me, him breaking me…that was him taking back his control.

He'd always buy me bonbons as a way of apology.

He'd eat most of them, allowing me only to have one or two, but it was the thought that counted, right?

I was six months pregnant when I said the wrong thing in front of his friends, and he decided to teach me a lesson I'd never forget. He, of course, waited until after they'd all left.

He dragged me out of bed. He punched and kicked and even strangled me until all he could see was red, and he kicked me down the stairs.

I laid in a puddle of my own blood seeping out of me, and do you know what he did?

He didn't offer to help me up.

He didn't call the ambulance - not right away, at least.

He kicked me.

Not once. Not twice. I counted a solid five kicks. To my back. To my stomach. To my head.

Then he called the ambulance.

I lost my child that night.

I also lost any hope of having any more children; the internal damage was too severe.

Zachary was the perfect husband, the perfect grieving father-to-be, while I was in the hospital. He brought me home to people waiting for us outside on the street, wanting to offer their condolences while holding casserole dishes in their hands.

Once the door closed, he expected things to go back to the way they were, with me serving him hand and foot.

Recovery time for housewives wasn't a thing back then, I mean, why would there be? What did we do all day but sit our butts and watch soap operas, right?

It's safe to say I hated him.

I did love him, or I thought I loved him, back in the beginning. But I quickly grew to hate the monster he'd become.

I tried talking to my mother about him, about us, and about what he'd done. I'm sure you can imagine her response. Suck it up, buttercup. I chose this life when I spread my legs before the ring was on my finger, so I learned to make the bed and make it right.

Oh, I'd make it right, that's for sure.

The first thing I did was get a job.

I found work at the sweet shop where he bought me my bonbons, and I hid that money as best I could. I was tired of asking for permission to buy something or having to beg for an allowance.

Zachary hated it at first. He said it didn't look good, that the optics were he didn't do a good enough job providing until he figured out a way to spin it.

Working was good for my mental health and helped me to take my mind off losing our baby. Plus, everyone knew I loved chocolate and sweets, so what better place than there for me to work?

Once he said that, everyone was good and praised him for his forward thinking.

I simpered as much as humanly possible when we were in groups, but it did no good.

He still hit me. He punched, kicked, and left his mark where no one else could see. No one questioned the long sleeves or the high necklines, why would they?

At that time, people turned a blind eye. It's not like I was the only woman to live with an angry man, and back then, it was always blamed on the woman anyway. We must have done something to deserve it and all that stupid nonsense.

Why is it always okay for the man to be angry but not the woman?

Zachary may have had plans for his life, but so did I. I didn't want to marry young, have kids, and get lost in the cycle of being a wife and a mother. I wanted to do something with my life.

Zachary wasn't the only one who had to make adjustments, but of course, in the eyes of society, he was the only one that mattered.

Staying at home, cleaning, cooking, and fiddling my thumbs wasn't for me.

I liked being busy, and the second I decided to go and get a job, to have my own money, I knew this was the way for me to reclaim my life.

Working in the sweet shop was everything I'd always wanted. You know, I used to dream about opening up my own bakery, even though I knew the likelihood of that happening was small.

I was hired right away and offered a shift the next day. I came at the perfect time, they'd just lost staff and were running behind. I was so happy, but Zachary…he was so angry with me. I don't need to tell you how he reacted.

He made sure I was in pain during my first shift, let's just say that.

I loved that job. There was nothing about it I hated. It didn't matter what they asked me to do, I did it with a smile. Maybe it was because I was out of the house. Maybe it was because I was doing something for myself.

Or maybe, it was because my bosses seemed to appreciate the help and were also so encouraging.

It didn't take long for them to let me in the kitchen and help make the desserts they sold. My favorite was making the chocolates.

The art of making chocolate is a delicate one, but the results are to die for, don't you think?

You need the right ingredients and the right kind of passion.

Not every chocolate I made was perfect, but nothing went to waste, and I took a lot of the castoffs - whether it was chocolate-filled bonbons or other desserts - home.

Zachary loved the bonbons as much as I did. I never told him I made them. He thought I was just the hired help, the one who cashed people out and filled their orders. I was okay with him thinking that. The few times he came into the shop, I, thankfully, was always upfront.

While I loved working, I was the only one in the family who did.

That's a lie: my parents loved it because they started asking me for extra money. But Zachary's side of the family hated it. His parents especially thought it was a poor reflection on them, and they came over one day for a 'chat'.

I had the day off, so I made sure to clean the house real good.

I had fresh coffee waiting, with some baked items and, of course, the bonbons. Unfortunately, nothing I did was good enough. His mother found dust where there wasn't any, and they kept remarking on how old and tired the house looked. They suggested a fresh coat of paint might help, even to the point where they bought the paint and paintbrushes. They should have hired painters too, but that would have cost too much, and surely I could take time off my little job to fix the house, right?

I did, even though I hated to.

Zachary hated it too. He blamed me for having to do all the painting, for the disrespect toward his parents, and for making him look bad in front of the whole town. He wanted me to quit. In fact, he demanded it.

I refused.

Every day that I went to work and didn't quit, I ended up with a beating. Some days were so bad that I couldn't do much at work but slowly walk around the floor. My employers knew what Zachary did, and they made sure I knew work was a safe place.

One afternoon, the husband helped me make the chocolates. He said he wanted to teach me some new techniques and that I was ready to level up my training.

I was so excited.

He taught me so many skills that I never knew. Along the way, he also would tell me stories about how chocolatiers were often commissioned to poison people back in the days of Kings and Queens. He'd tell me how they would mask the taste of the poison and then even went so far as to suggest how it could be done today without

anyone getting caught.

That couple, they were my lifesavers.

He left me on my own while he went to work out in the front, and I decided to put his lessons to practice. I made some special chocolates just for Zachary, and I saved them for the weekend when we were supposed to start painting the living room.

Funny how there are some poisons out there that can mask the symptoms of a heart attack.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SHANNON TO JACK

I think it's safe to say that I hated Zachary. Do you blame me?

I was a child when we married, but thanks to him and his abuse, I grew to be a strong woman.

Some women break when they're faced with horrific and nasty partners. Other women find ways to dig deep roots and weather the storm. I'm not saying being in an abusive relationship is okay, or am I condemning or praising women for how to handle that abuse? I'm just saying we all are different.

Abusive relationships, especially for the women in this place, are a common theme; have you ever noticed that?

Most of us break, at least, most of the women in here broke a long time ago.

Did I? I must have, I guess.

At the time, I would have said no, that I only grew stronger and more resilient, that I dug deep and found strength I had no idea resided in me.

Looking back, I'll admit that Zachary broke me.

He did it on purpose, too.

But I don't think he anticipated the outcome.

See…the me in high school was a strong, vibrant, confident girl who believed I could do anything I put my mind to.

The me within my marriage was a weak, bland mouse of a girl who only tried to survive each day.

Zachary's goal was to break me and then mold me into the wife he thought he deserved, and when that didn't work, his anger grew and intensified, and I always paid the price.

Losing our baby was a blessing in disguise.

While I was pregnant, all I focused on was the day I could hold my baby in my arms and be loved by someone so pure and innocent.

Any thoughts for the future were focused on my child's happiness and safety. I was an afterthought.

Once I lost that baby, I knew it was either find myself or one day Zachary would end up killing me.

All the little steps I took were in full defiance. Getting that job behind his back was the best thing I could have done for myself, truth be told. It not only gave me a little financial freedom, but independence too. I also discovered 'me', if that makes any sense to you.

I was reminded of who I was before him, of my dreams and goals, and the fact I was a person that mattered.

That job, that life, that marriage shaped me into who I am today.

I won't say for better or worse because who I am is who I am, and

there's no changing that.

I wouldn't change me for anyone or anything.

If I could go back…I'd do it all over again and yes, even marrying Zachary.

Living with regrets is wasteful, don't you think?

Of course, you know what happened, right?

Zachary ate all the chocolates as we were painting the living room walls.

Or rather, he sat at the table and ate them while drinking beer and getting wasted while instructing me on how to properly paint the walls. As if the man would get his hands dirty and do manual work, or god-forbid, even hire someone to do the work for us, someone who actually knew how to properly paint a house.

I gritted my teeth as he 'instructed' and remained silent.

He did make a few comments about the new taste of the chocolates. I absolutely did not tell him that I made them, but I did say that the owners were trying something different, and this box was a tester created specifically for him since the owners knew how much he loved their chocolates.

Zachary, of course, felt proud of that fact. Why wouldn't he? That meant he was special and important.

He didn't even think to ask if I wanted any.

Actually, I seem to remember him telling me he thought I needed to stop sampling the chocolates so much at work that I was starting to look a little pudgy.

Word of warning, Jack…never tell a woman she is starting to look a little pudgy.

It didn't take too long…but in reality, it felt like it took forever…but that heart attack finally happened.

Thankfully, Zachary had started not to feel well and decided to go have a nap. I was to wake him when I was done painting the room, so of course, I took my time, and when I finally went to the bedroom to wake him up, he was dead.

It was wonderful. I sat on the bed for a good twenty minutes and just looked at him. I said all the things I'd needed and wanted to say to him - how much I hated him, how living with him had been hell, how I hoped he was in hell and being tormented - it felt so good to get it all off my chest.

Then I worked myself into a frenzy and called emergency services. I was frantic and distraught; I continued to play that role when the ambulance pulled up, when the police took my statement, and even when his family showed up.

I was the perfect wife, distressed at the sudden loss of my husband.

Of course, I made sure to throw out the rest of the chocolates and the box, but I kept a few of his empty beer bottles out on the table.

No one questioned anything. His heart gave out, and it could have been the manual labor of painting the walls, or it could have been a combination of the alcohol and the paint…but everyone was extremely sorry for my loss, and I did a wonderful job playing the grieving widow.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SHANNON

I didn't lie when I said Gregory and I had a whirlwind romance.

After Zachary's death, and after his insurance money came in, the first thing I did was move away. I couldn't leave town fast enough, to be honest.

Zachary's parents offered to gift me the house following his death. They said that he would want me to be taken care of, especially since I was pregnant again with his child.

I wasn't, for the record. I lied when I hinted that I could have been pregnant.

See, I'd made a scene one day during lunch with my in-laws. I think the lunch was more of a 'so now what' type of affair. I had a feeling they were either going to kick me out of the house, so I made a small scene where the tears flowed, and I made statements such as 'I hadn't even told him the news' while placing a hand on my stomach.

I stressed how worried I was about where I would live since I couldn't afford things on my own now, and I maybe said it a little louder than needed, but in the end, they signed the house over to me and were so excited for their new grandchild. They promised I'd be taken care of, and when his mother mentioned the insurance money, I played it down as if I hadn't even thought about that money or what it would mean for me and our baby.

When I had a 'miscarriage,' everyone was so distraught. I don't know how I did it, but I played the grieving woman perfectly.

I could see the disappointment on Zachary's parents' faces and the regret that they moved so quickly to sign the house over to me, but life is never fair, is it?

After everything I'd gone through, I was owed that insurance money.

I didn't realize it would cause so many issues, but it also changed my life, so why complain?

One of those issues was my parents.

There was blood in the water, and they circled like the sharks they were. All they wanted was money, money that was finally mine.

So I did the one thing I could. I left. Not permanently, but I would go on extended trips, claiming I needed space, needed to get away from all the memories…the truth was, I just needed to get away from them all. All of them.

At first, it would be day trips. Then weekend trips where I would stay at bed and breakfast places or hotels.

That's when I realized that I loved traveling. That I loved the

whole experience of it.

It was also when I felt the most free.

I was always worried that someone would guess how Zachary truly died, that I'd be questioned and eventually sent to prison. But when I was away, there were no prying eyes, no one asking me how I was holding up, no one praising Zachary and saying how much I must miss him.

It was late spring when I decided to go away for a few weeks. I stayed at the cutest oceanside hotel and would take long walks on the beach every day.

That's where I met Gregory.

I'd noticed him from the hotel, and I noticed him noticing me.

It's nice to be noticed. Especially when the one noticing is a very distinguished man, and that's precisely what Gregory was. Distinguished.

I knew right away he was someone I needed in my life. The key was not to be desperate and to make him believe he was chasing me and not the other way around.

I don't know where the boldness came from, but it was like I was becoming someone new, transforming into a creature so opposite to who I'd been.

And I liked it.

Every time I saw him, I'd act coy. I'd smile, look him in the eye, lean toward him if we were standing close, but then act shy, turn away with a slight hesitation as if waiting for him to reach out.

Was I surprised when he approached me at the restaurant?

Absolutely not.

I sat at the balcony, looking over the water. I knew the second he entered the room, I could feel his gaze on my face, but I didn't turn toward him. I heard him walk toward me, knew he stood to the side and yet I still pretended my gaze was on the water.

I played a part, and he was my enraptured audience.

When I said our love was fast and strong, that was because I made sure he fell for me.

I created a web to snare him and snare him I did.

See, I'd done my research. I knew exactly who Gregory was.

He was the owner of the hotel, and it wasn't just one hotel; it was a whole chain along the East Coast, and he was just about to open a new one in California.

Now that I had money, now that I knew how nice it was to have money, I wasn't about to go backward. Never again would I be poor. Never again would I let a man be in control of me.

I morphed myself into the woman Gregory needed in his life.

I was both strong and frail, someone he could take care of, but not

someone who would break easily. I was beautiful and dressed smart, I knew the right things to say, knew when to listen, and knew how to blend in and let the focus be on the man of the hour.

The idea to get married fast was his, but who do you think planted that idea in the first place?

His friends and family didn't approve. They said I was unknown and could pose a problem in the future, but we were so in love that Gregory didn't listen to them.

I did my best to make them all like me, and little by little, as I proved myself to be unassuming and someone to trust, they lowered their inhibitions.

He made sure I was welcomed within his inner circle, whether they liked it or not. Gregory had a way of making people bend to his will - and bend people did because the consequences of snubbing him were too costly.

Whether it was begrudgingly or not, my days filled up with long boozy lunches, shopping trips, and various charity outreaches. I may have been a stay-at-home wife, but I wasn't a lazy one.

Surprisingly, I missed having a job and bringing in my own money.

It was Gregory's idea to rent out my bungalow. That provided a nice little income that I let sit. I didn't need the money, Gregory had enough for both of us.

The one thing I appreciated about him was that he didn't want to have children. He didn't even want to adopt, which I think surprised me a little. His fortune would be passed on within his rather large family, and he made sure I would be well taken care of if anything were to ever happen to him.

What more could a woman want, right?

Well, it turns out a woman can want a lot more.

For one, I wanted my freedom.

Gregory was handsome, rich, and very well-endowed, but he was also very controlling.

He planned my days. He knew my schedule, inside and out. If I did anything that wasn't within what he'd planned for me, I'd be inundated with questions and accusations.

He always assumed I was having an affair. That was the first place his mind would go, and nothing I did or said would prove otherwise.

It got so bad that eventually, he paid someone to stay with me whenever he wasn't around. That person became my driver and bodyguard all rolled into one. The only alone time I could get was in the ladies bathroom - which was absolutely ridiculous.

No one ever blinked an eye, either, when my guard would sit at the next table if I had lunch with the ladies or when he'd be standing behind and off to the side if I was out shopping. It was like his

presence was expected, like everyone knew why he was there.

Trust me when I say it wasn't possible for me to have an affair, even if I'd wanted one.

Well…until I figured out a way.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SHANNON TO JACK

The fact I put up with that level of control for over two years is an amazing feat.

I was the perfect wife, in public and in private.

Sure, there were times I needed some privacy, who doesn't? If I wanted to head to a bakery and gorge on chocolates, I preferred to do that without judgment.

We were married a year and eight months before I saw even a smidgen of hope, hope of escaping his controlling nature.

My guard, it turns out, had a bit of a crush on me.

He wanted to swoop in and save me. He didn't like how Gregory treated me and thought I could do better.

I may have planted that seed during our times alone. I had a feeling he had a crush on me, so I decided to test it and see how far I could take it.

Turns out pretty far.

We never had sex, only because I knew that would have been a foolish thing to do. But I did lead him on, and we made out quite a bit. It all started with a brush of our hands or me leaning into the hand that rested on my back as he held a door open for me. Those little touches, the little indications I was interested, that's all it took.

The moment I let him kiss me, I knew I had him.

Our times together were hot. I'd let him touch me, finger me, pleasure me, but never did he ever enter me. He wanted to, but that was a hard line I wouldn't cross. I never wanted Gregory to suspect anything was happening between us because the consequences for me would be ruinous. I never told him that, though.

Instead, I said how scared I was for both of us if Gregory ever found out. Truth be told, my husband would have killed us both, I know it.

I never came right out and said I wished for Gregory's death, but then I didn't need to.

I also never came right out and asked how I would go about finding a contract killer to do the job for me.

Some men need to believe they are the ones who come up with the ideas, that they are the ones playing heroes.

It takes a smart woman to understand this. Some women believe they need to be in charge, that they need to wear the pants and show how strong and self-sufficient they are.

I've never been that type of woman.

I'm okay with being in the shadows, standing to the side while letting others believe they're in charge.

So, when he came up with the idea of how to take care of Gregory so

we could be together, I did what any woman would do, and I smiled and encouraged him.

I didn't need to know all the little details of how he would take care of this, the most important thing was for him to know I trusted him to protect me.

I still don't fully understand what happened that day. Three men went out on that boat. None returned.

His goal was to make sure he came back for me. He never did.

I wasn't too upset. There was no future for us, he was just a means to an end, and his loss of life actually worked in my favor.

I don't know what he did or what happened on that boat, but I made sure everyone knew just how heartbroken I was.

No one ever suspected me.

I really should have been an actress. I would have won an Emmy for my performances.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SHANNON

Phillip was a different beast all on his own.

I didn't lie when I said he made me feel like the Queen of his world. He spoiled me more than Gregory ever did, and oh, how I loved it.

When Phillip was around and focused on me, things were wonderful.

When Phillip was focused on work, and I was just one more thing on his plate, he was a monster.

I thought I could tame him, tame my very own Beast, but I was wrong.

Phillip placed me in a gilded cage where my only freedom was a result of his benevolence. You can't imagine what that was like, trust me, you can't.

He was an important man. More important than the President of the United States. He was the puppet master, and you can't fathom what that meant within his world.

Within my world, it meant I had no freedom. My days were scheduled according to his needs and diary.

I mentioned he traveled a lot, right? Whether I wanted to or not, I had to go with him. I was never left alone either, no matter where I was. He always had someone within my vicinity…whether a bodyguard or my own assistant.

Yes, I had an assistant. Someone who babysat me and reported back to him everything and anything I did that he probably wouldn't approve of.

I thought marrying him would make my life easier.

I was so wrong.

He was controlling and manipulative, and yes, he had a temper.

It wasn't one of those explosive, burn-the-house-down types of tempers. It was more like a flash ember that obliterated everything in one second. There was never any warning. Never any build up. One moment, he'd be fine; the next, he was the devil incarnate.

Multiple times I thought he'd killed me. He liked to suffocate me, stealing the very air from my body, and I can't even count how many times I thought I was dying.

I never knew what would bring it on, either. It could be that I wore something he disapproved of, or maybe it reminded him of someone else. Maybe I wore the wrong perfume or didn't smile or laugh when appropriate. Maybe someone made an off-handed comment about me or suggested something that he mistook to mean he wasn't doing

enough for me…it could have been any number of things that would make him snap.

One moment, I'd be lying in bed reading a book; the next, I'd struggle to breathe, clawing at the pillow or his hand against my face. I could be sitting in a chair, my back to him, and the next thing I knew, my mouth and nose would be wrapped in plastic wrap.

I learned very early on never to turn my back on him and always to give him my full attention when we were alone.

Phillip couldn't lose control of his business life; he couldn't allow his anger to manifest in public, so I was that outlet for him in private. Not that I'm saying he was right. I've just come to realize the why of what he would do to me.

Throughout our time together, I never doubted his love. Nor did I ever refuse his apologetic gestures. That didn't mean I accepted it, however.

I knew that one day, he wouldn't stop. That one day, he would kill me, whether intentionally or not, and I had to do something about it.

I couldn't divorce him. That would ensure my death for sure.

His first wife drowned by suicide, but I knew it was by his hands, not done of her own choice. I'd found her journal, something she'd hidden away, and she wrote about all the times he'd hurt her in the same ways he'd hurt me. Her very last entry stated she had a plan to leave him, to serve him divorce papers and make sure he could never harm her again…so I know she wouldn't have killed herself.

I had to think outside the box this time, mainly because I had no one in my inner circle that I could trust.

Phillip, he never knew the truth about me. I think he could sense I had a ruthlessness deep down, but I think he thought he'd tamed me.

I had to be patient, but not too patient because I didn't know how much time I had left. I honestly feared for my life. His stress levels were high, and I knew it was only a matter of time before he'd go too far with me.

So, one night, while we were relaxing over a glass of wine, I broached the subject of contract killers.

While he sat in his chair reading the newspaper, I had a book on my lap. I'd specifically picked it up from the store since it was a story about a man who hired someone to kill a rival family. I mentioned how ludicrous it was that contract killers were a thing of fiction, and he put his paper down and smiled at me.

I still recall the words he said that night.

Fiction is always wrapped in truth.

I used that as a launch pad and asked him question after question. He never came right out and said he'd hired a contract killer, but he made it clear that within his circle, there were men who could be

hired for any price.

Any price.

He told me stories of ‘rumors’ he’d heard over the years, of political figures, of important men who needed to disappear in ways that looked like ‘accidents’, and even though he sold this as things he’d only heard, I knew he was telling me about things he’d orchestrated himself.

Now, most people would have backed down, realizing they were out of their league, but I wasn’t that smart. Or stupid, I guess.

If my husband was as important as I thought he was, surely someone out there wanted to get rid of him. Right? It was just a matter of finding them…and for a while, I was clueless.

That was a good thing because I knew he was suspicious. There came a point during our conversation where he stopped and looked at me. I knew he was trying to read me, but by then, I had my mask on and schooled my features to show only rapt attention and not fascination.

Fascination would show my cards. Rapt attention meant I was enjoying his stories.

Later on that week, he asked me how I liked my book. I pretended to play dumb as if I didn’t know exactly what book he was talking about. I told him I’d lent it to one of our cleaners who I knew liked to read - something I’d done in the past and knew he approved of. I then pulled out a new book I was reading, this one a historical romance, I think. I can’t remember exactly, but I recall it being a completely different genre, which I’d done on purpose. I didn’t need him thinking I had an interest in the subject or anything.

Turns out, he had something to prove to me. He’d gone and picked up a few more books - some autobiographies and some fiction, wanting to prove just how real contract killers are.

I thanked him, looked through them, and set them on my bedside table.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SHANNON TO JACK

Turns out, finding someone to take care of my husband wasn't a difficult thing to do. With a little bit of patience, someone came to find me.

My third 'assistant' turned out to be a snitch, or double agent, I guess you could say. Despite all her vetting, someone slipped past my husband's security, which was good for me, but bad for him.

Patty Summers. She came in like a spring flower just starting to bud, but boy, oh boy, she had the strength of a good summer storm, you know, the type like what we get here. It comes on suddenly, destroys everything in its wake, and then leaves as if all is sunshine and roses.

She was meek and even-tempered in the beginning. I didn't pay her much mind, knowing she was one more mole sent to keep tabs on me. She kept my daily diary, reminded me of events or appointments, took care of my correspondence, and even went shopping with me to buy new outfits when Phillip felt my wardrobe was getting too stale.

Every night, she'd have her nightly session with my husband. Oh, nothing like that, mind your manners. She'd go in with her little notebook and share all about my day, and when their time was up, I'd either get a lovely reward of time with my husband, or I'd suffer the consequences of his imagined shame.

There were these little games my assistants would play with me over the years. Tests, really, if you want the truth. My husband liked to test my loyalty. I wasn't the only one, he tested everyone's loyalty. There were no one-two-three strikes with him. At the first hint of betrayal, you disappeared.

The first assistant I had, I thought we might be friends and that she could be a confidant for me. It didn't take me long to learn otherwise. I'd confessed I was a little bored, that some days I missed being single and living my own life. That night, I was forced to drink soured milk as punishment, then while I was bent over a toilet after emptying my stomach, my mouth and nose were wrapped in plastic while he counted to ten.

Your first inclination when someone steals the air you need to breathe is to fight. You panic, you do everything you can to save yourself. It took me some time to ignore that basic reaction and to go limp, to count on him, to relax enough that I could wait him out.

Patty Summers was different.

While Phillip liked to test me, I decided to test her. I'd share things with her that would definitely get me in trouble, and I'd wait all evening and through the night for my consequence, but one never came. I even eavesdropped on their nightly conversations to see if she'd share my slight betrayals, but she painted a picture of smooth sailings, of a lovely wife who

lived to please her husband.

I had to wonder what game she was playing. Wouldn't you?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SHANNON

The first hint that maybe Patty was on my side was during a shopping trip.

Phillip had been very clear in his instructions on what he wanted me to buy. We had a party to go to in the Hamptons that weekend, and we flew into New York a few days early so he could conduct some business and I could get some retail therapy.

He always handed out a list of things he expected me to buy. He'd be very specific with his requests, down to the exact perfume he wanted me to buy, from which store, and sometimes even specifying the salesperson he expected me to buy from. I very rarely went to the big chain stores where an outfit could be bought by anyone.

He liked to send me to small designers, those who owned him a favor, or promised one-of-a-kind looks.

We were at this one shop where champagne was served. Phillip wanted me to wear a grey dress, one that was long, with a slit on the side. The dress selected for me was boring, similar to many other dresses in my closet. Another dress caught my eye while I stood there, looking at myself in the mirror. It, too, was grey, with a hint of sparkling silver threads, with a deep v back held together by a dangly chain.

It was beautiful and eye-catching. It was everything the dress I currently wore wasn't.

Patty suggested I try it on.

I said no, knowing Phillip wouldn't be pleased. Patty didn't listen, though. She went and selected the dress and held it out to me. I recall her asking why I wore clothes meant for someone else when I should be specifically wearing clothes designed for me.

The silly girl should have known better. My clothes were designed for me, specifically by my husband.

She convinced me to try it on at least, and so I did. I immediately fell in love with it, and with her encouragement, I took that dress rather than the drab grey one.

Truth be told, I was nervous about wearing it. Nervous and excited at the same time. What would Phillip think? What would my consequence be for picking out my own dress?

He loved it. He did comment on the surprise, but the way his hand would keep touching my skin, how he stood close, the hunger in his eyes all that night…let's say there was no consequence that night.

That night, my passionate husband worshipped my body, not like I was his queen but rather his goddess.

With Patty's encouragement, I started to find other ways to insert my independence, to remake myself into who I used to be and not the bland creature my husband turned me into to.

Little by little, I started to trust her.

Then one day, while we were out having lunch, I noticed someone slipped her a note. It wasn't the first time I saw her bump into someone while we were out, but it was the first time I saw the passage of information.

I started to wonder if my assistant, vetted by my husband's security, was, in fact, a spy.

Three months in, I realized she wasn't quite a spy. Or maybe I should say she wasn't just a spy.

She approached me, much like what you'd see in those movies, and wanted me to turn on Phillip. At first, I said no, sure that this was just one more test. Except, unlike previous times when I'd passed with flying colors and his tests would take a bit of a reprieve, she didn't.

She would start saying things, suggesting things, and asking questions about Phillip that no one else ever had.

We were on a flight from Spain, returning home after we'd flown there for a brief vacation on a beautiful yacht. While I suntanned, Phillip held meetings. On our way home, while he sat in the back of the plane talking with his associates, I sat up at the front with Patty.

She mentioned a name to me, and asked if I knew the person. She then asked if I knew the true reason for our trip was to ensure that person's death. While I sunbathed, my husband plotted, and at the exact moment someone was being murdered was the same moment we both boarded our plane after shaking the hands of some very important political people.

She asked me if I understood just how dangerous my husband was. She said some very important people needed my husband to leave the political landscape and stop being the puppet master.

She asked if I'd be interested in helping her save myself, to save my life, and my answer was simple.

Of course, I was.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SHANNON TO JACK

When it comes to self preservation, it's amazing what one will do.

Have you ever found that?

Especially when you're faced with possible death - one will do anything to save themselves.

Her ask was simple. On our next trip, which would happen in two days, I needed to place a listening device in his briefcase.

The same briefcase that never left his side.

The same briefcase that had a lock only he knew the combination of.

Simple task but definitely not easy. Or so she thought.

You're probably wondering how I did it, aren't you?

One thing Phillip and I liked to do was surprise each other with little gifts. He'd often leave them for me in places I would never think to look. If he were away on a trip that I couldn't attend, he'd leave them in my lingerie drawer, in one of my shoes, even in my purse, or tucked behind a pillow. For him, I'd leave him a little something in his suit coat pocket, in his balled-up socks, a note tucked away in his wallet, or even on his desk for him to find once he returned. If I were with him, I'd place things in his suitcase or beside his coffee, that kind of thing.

The gifts I'd leave him were little things, things I knew would mean a lot to him - like notes saying I love you or sweet dreams, sometimes I'd leave a pair of my panties in his suitcase or even once in his coat pocket. He'd leave me notes, but also jewelry and perfume, sometimes a candle or something he'd bought at a sweet shop.

The listening device Patty gave me was quite small, to be honest. It was a simple pen. It looked like a custom, handmade pen that you'd pick up on Regent Street in London. The best part of it was my husband loved his pens.

He was known for his fancy pens - even to the point that if he gave you a pen as a gift, that was something to cherish.

The pen was in a fancy black box, which I wrapped up with a nice silver bow. He was in his office, finishing up some paperwork, and seemed a little bothered when I came and sat on his lap.

He wanted to know if I was all packed. I told him I was ready to leave whenever he was, but before we did, I had one little request. This seemed to pique his interest.

I asked him to leave his briefcase open for me so that I could put something in there for him from me. Something that was a surprise.

He pulled out his briefcase and set it on his desk. He wanted me to give him the gift, and he'd place it in there himself.

I shook my head and played coy. It took a little bit of convincing, but

he finally agreed to let him leave his gift, while his back was turned, and only before we were ready to head out the door.

He was a little possessive of his briefcase, which always had me wondering what was in there.

You'd be curious, too, don't you think?

I set the box inside the case, closed the lid, and locked it. It took maybe three seconds.

He waited till we were on the plane before he opened it.

I saw the look on his face as he held the box…it was like he was asking if I wanted him to open it. I nodded.

Patty was there, watching it all.

He loved the pen, but secretly, I think he loved the fact I gave him the pen more. He played it with - wrote a few scribbles on a page to see how it flowed and felt in his grip, then he placed it in the front pocket on the inside of his suit and said it would be the only pen he used from now on.

I placed my hands on both sides of his face and gave him a long kiss, not caring that we weren't alone on the plane and that everyone was watching. Our public displays of affection were normal, almost expected, and the passion within our marriage was one that had yet to subdue.

I knew he needed a passionate marriage, for me to show him how much I wanted him and desired him, especially in public, so that's what I did, even if it always made me uncomfortable.

I did what was asked of me, I made sure he had the pen. Patty never said another word to me about it, other than to thank me and to be patient.

It's hard being patient when you know your own safety and security is on the line.

CHAPTER TWENTY

SHANNON

When it finally happened, I wasn't with him.

While he was in a different country, I remained at home to host a charity event.

I had no idea anything was going to happen. One minute, I was walking about a room, a glass of champagne in hand, talking to anyone and everyone who stopped me, and the next minute, Patty was at my side, pulling me away to a private corner and telling me my husband was dead.

He'd been found in bed with his throat slit.

The emotions that cascaded through me were overwhelming. I was heartbroken, berserk with grief, but also relief. Relief I was finally safe.

The dress I wore to this event was high-necked. Not because that's what I chose to wear, but because it was what I had to wear in order to hide the bruises on my skin from when he'd tried to strangle me before he left on his trip.

Once word spread, you can only imagine the whispers.

Three times a widow.

If only they knew I was three times a killer. Soon to be four.

Let me explain that a little.

Patty never left my side after Phillip's death. Maybe she was worried I'd tell someone, maybe she feared I'd confessed it was all my fault…maybe she didn't trust me, I'm not sure. But by then, I'd come to know my assistant a little more than she probably wanted, and I knew from her gazes and questions that they - she and whomever she worked for - couldn't trust me to remain silent.

If only they knew the secrets I kept.

Days up to Phillip's death, Patty had been extra attentive. She hovered to the point even Phillip commented right before he left. She was always trying to find a reason to be around him, and he didn't like it. Before he left, he'd mentioned to me that it might be time for Patty to move on and that I could help him select my next assistant when he returned.

I know she overheard.

I won't lie and say she made me nervous after his death. She hovered. She would never leave me alone. She was always there, telling me it wasn't my fault, thanking me for helping as I had, and ensuring he kept the pen on him at all times had given them more information than they'd expected.

I should have left things alone, but I didn't. I couldn't.

So I made some chocolates.

That was my main mistake.

I guess, over the years, I'd relaxed more than I should have with Patty. I told her about my first husband and his love for my chocolates. I also mentioned how he'd died shortly after eating chocolates I'd made him - one reason why I rarely ate the chocolates Phillip would buy me, instead, giving them away to the staff or even to Patty to enjoy.

I guess she wrote that down like she wrote everything down in her reports…but she didn't just write down what I'd said; she also added her own thoughts and follow-up actions.

Like, look to see if there'd been a toxicology report on my first husband.

When Patty died, the powers that be wouldn't let things rest. They looked into her death and realized she'd been poisoned by the chocolates I'd made.

Damn chocolates. I knew eventually they'd be the death of me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SHANNON TO JACK

I know what people call me. The black, red, and green widow. They're not wrong.

I paid for an expensive attorney to keep me out of those horrible prisons and to make sure I ended up in a place like this. A place where I could be in charge of those around me, the other inmates, and not always be concerned about someone wanting to kill me.

The plea of insanity worked. It was my only saving grace.

When the police showed up one more to question me, I'd accidentally taken one too many sleeping pills. Now, for some people, it would knock them out cold, but for me, I would live in a state of fog, where I was half awake, half asleep, and had absolutely no filter.

I guess when they came to question me about Patty's death, I said a little too much.

Otherwise, I would have gotten away with it all.

Most of the time, we are our own worst enemies.

But my life hasn't been all that bad in here either. I've had some wonderful friendships, found love a few times, and I've met people like you, Jack. You may appear gruff, but inside, you're a soft teddy bear full of pointed needles…get too close, and it can be deadly, aren't I right?

You're a killer, Jack, just like me.

We have that in common, don't we? It's too bad you weren't a bit older, or I was a bit younger, and we'd met somewhere else. We could have had something, you and I.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

JACK

Ahh, Shannon. Sweet, beautiful Shannon.

She wasn't what you were expecting, was she?

I prefer the honest woman, truth be told, not the one she tried to get everyone to believe.

Sure, to look at her, you'd think she was harmless. But one look into her eyes and you knew something was wrong inside of her.

Shannon died at five in the morning. I held her hand as she passed with a smile on her lips. I know she wasn't seeing an angel; there was no way unless it was the Angel of Death. But if that was the case, why die smiling?

Turns out, she said something to Ike before he'd left the room hours ago.

Her one true love was the Angel of Death. She always believed they had a special bond and she was excited to finally be with him in the afterlife.

Hmmm. Not sure what to think about that one. But, if there was someone she could have a torrid affair with, why not another killer?

Turns out…she wasn't talking about an actual angel, but another patient.

Would you be interested in hearing his confession? He died about five years before she did and his story is quite the tale.

PATIENT: JIMMY DALE

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

Special thanks to Natasha, Kimberly & Rachel Campbell & Jen for helping name those in this confession

TRIGGER WARNING

The following confessions all deal with victims and survivors of rape. No gory details are included, mainly because they aren't necessary. But I did want to warn you in case you are a survivor.

For the record, and in case you need to hear it - you are one hell of a person. You are amazing; you are a god or goddess, and you have a strength most of us can never understand, and the fact that you are here, reading this, tells me just how freaking amazing you are.

Now, I'm not going to assume you can't handle this next confession, but I will ask you not to read it - because YOUR MENTAL HEALTH matters to me.

CHAPTER ONE

JACK

You know by now I love to hunt. Give me my Winchester, a few boxes of rounds, and the thrill of the chase, and I'm in.

For all the hunters out there, we all have our personal favorite game to go after. Some like birds. Some like deer. Some like bear. You get my drift, right?

I've done a lot of hunting in my life. I've got a freezer full of wild game too.

There's one thing I've never gone hunting for, however, and I bet you haven't either.

Well…let me change that. I have no idea if you have or not - and who am I to assume?

Let me introduce you to my next patient: Jimmy Dale.

Now, with a name like that, you assume a few things. One is that he's from the south. Two, that he's a redneck. Three, he's the type who loves to drink cheap ass beer while tailgating out in a field with his buds.

If you assume any of that, you'd be wrong.

For one, Jimmy Dale prefers Jack Daniels, not beer. He says it's a name thing, which I get.

For another, don't let someone's name fool you.

If you were to meet JD on the street, in the middle of a city, you'd probably think he was a banker or investment-type dude with a dainty feminine look about him.

If you were to talk to him, you'd be surprised not to hear a southern twang in his voice. He's got one of those smooth, suave styles of voice that catches you off guard and takes you a moment or two to register what it is he's actually saying.

My first time meeting JD, I almost thought he was a fellow staffer until I turned around and saw what he wore.

I'd had my back turned to him and was helping another patient straighten out his shirt he'd gotten all twisted. JD asked if he could help as if he truly wanted to be of service, to do something…there was almost a sense of desperation in his voice.

I'd heard about JD, but only in passing. The guy was one of the easy ones unless you pissed him off, then he was as cunning as a shark, and the need to restrain him fast was a necessity.

He seemed disappointed when I passed on his offer, and in fact, he trailed me for the rest of my shift, barely leaving my side, always peering over my shoulder when he could. He wasn't rude or creepy, just bored.

I've actually enjoyed chatting with JD in the past. I've particularly liked to hear his stories in a morbid way.

I offered him one of my deals early on, only because I'd heard all the rumors, but no one ever really knew the truth.

JD loved to hunt. The need and drive to hunt was in his bones, embedded within his DNA, he'd tell you.

Except for his prey, they weren't mere birds or anything with four legs.

He preferred the two-legged kind…the kind like you and me.

CHAPTER TWO

JACK

The lights on the floor flicker in the darkness, casting eerie shadows that grow then disappear, grow, then disappear, over and over.

I count the seconds in between the flickers.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five…flicker.

BOOM.

A thunderous clap rattles the walls, and instant insanity reigns within the rooms.

For a moment, I let the chaos grow, swirl around me, and do nothing to stop it.

BOOM.

Another clap of thunder, followed by a burst of lightning and one more flicker of the lights before we're plunged into complete darkness.

"Well, shit," Ike says as he rounds the corner and stops short of bumping into me.

I'm standing in front of the window, where a small shaft of light from the moon breaks through the darkness.

"Aren't the generators supposed to kick in about now?"

I shake my head. "They'd better hurry before hell gets loose downstairs."

That's all it takes for Ike to move into action. He secures all the doors up to this floor while I secure the elevator, just in case. I slide a triangle-shaped metal piece into a slot on the elevator door frame to keep it from opening in case an inmate gets in there and decides to come this way once the power kicks on.

It's happened before.

BOOM.

We have four patients on the floor. Four patients at death's door, and yet you'd think every room was full.

Coleen, one of my staffers, ran down the hallway.

"Make sure all the doors are secure," I say as she comes toward me.

"Already done. Stella is due for another round of meds, though. Should I wait?"

Stella. She's the one screaming like a banshee hyped on drugs.

"She should be secure, right?" I wait for Coleen to nod. "Go ahead then and give her another dose via the IV. Make sure her door is locked when you leave."

Coleen is a newbie to the floor. She's been here about a month now, and it's fair to say I'm impressed. I think she's got what it takes

to handle this floor. If she sticks with me, she'll be fine.

I quirk my brow at her, and she takes off, her flashlight illuminating the hallway as she heads toward Stella's room.

"She's a good one. Think she'll stick around?" Ike asks.

I shrug. "It would be nice, but who the hell knows? If the day shift doesn't snatch her, someone else will try. It's like we're their recruitment floor, for fucks sake."

I can't tell you how many nursing staff I've lost to other shifts and floors. What's wrong with the night watch? We've seriously got the comfy shift if you ask me.

"I'll check on the other two. JD has been asking for you," Ike tells me.

I'd intended to take JD a small shot and let him taste it during our talk. The guy is dying, and I'm sure he'd enjoy one last drink before entering his own hellscape.

The lights flicker a few more times like the generator is struggling to turn on.

Ike hands me a flashlight that he grabs from the office. "Just in case," he says.

I grab my flask of JD, push my chair down the hall, and continue to count the seconds between thunder and flash.

The storm is right over top of us. Fan-fucking-tastic.

At least I don't have a full floor. Stella will be lights out in no time; the other two are in comas, which just leaves JD.

And knowing him, he probably loves a good storm.

CHAPTER THREE

"It's about time, Jack." JD says as I unlock his door and push in my chair. "Wasn't sure if you were even going to come in, honestly."

"Sorry to keep you waiting." My sarcasm is real, but so is the smile on JD's face.

"Quite the light show out there, don't you think?" The flashes of lightning light up the otherwise dim room.

Bright light hurts JD's eyes, so we keep the main lights off in here for him. There's enough light in here for me to see what I'm doing and that's about it.

"So, how do I look?" He asks me, noticing that I'm giving him a good once-over.

He looks like shit. He's all skin and bones, to the point of almost being translucent. I'm surprised he has the energy even to be awake right now.

"Bad enough that I don't think I'm going to give you any of the Jack Daniel's I brought with me until right before the end." I set the flask down on the small table beside the bed.

"Now that's a nice going away present if I ever saw one."

"There are some things I do right," I say, "and knowing the best going-away gift is one of them."

This produces a smile but no chuckle.

"It's been a long one," JD says as he sighs.

"Too long?"

He gives me a slight nod. "This dying crap is the shits. I much prefer my games. No way you could let me outside and give me a count, could you?"

My eyes perk up at his request, not because it's an actual idea, or something I'd even remotely consider, but because I know this is all part of the story he's about to tell me.

"How long of a count?" My voice says I'm not intrigued, but we both know that's a lie.

His eyes close for a few seconds, and I wonder if he's gone to sleep. "Depends on the crime. For me…it wouldn't really matter. I wouldn't make it a step without collapsing, would I?"

Looking at his body, at his frailty, which I'm sure eats at him, I doubt he'd even be able to stand on his own two feet.

"Death by gunshot. Is that really how you want to go?"

He opens his eyes, and the glare he gives me tells me all I need to know.

"It's been a while, JD, since we last chatted. Refresh my memory, will you? You worked at a counseling center way back when, didn't

you?"

"You know I did." He sounds tired.

"Are you up to talking? I'm not here to force you." I'm giving him an out, even though I hope he doesn't take it.

He's always intrigued me.

Some people here are nasty right to the core.

Others, there is a sense of good in them, they just got sidetracked along the way.

JD - he was one of the good ones. For a while, at least.

I want to know what changed.

What was the trigger that turned him from healer to hunter?

CHAPTER FOUR

JD TO JACK

You know I worked at a that centre, so why ask?

I thought I'd be a psychologist once upon a time, you know? Turns out you needed really good grades and to come from a family who could grease the wheels for that to happen.

The best I could do was graduate from high school and take some community college courses while working part-time at my parents' grocery store.

I was all they had, which meant I had to give them all I had.

I don't know if that's what it's like nowadays, but I was raised in a small town where family meant everything and only the rebels walked away and never came back.

My parents weren't well off. They could have been - they ran the only grocery store in town - but they believed in helping others, giving back, and donating their time and resources to ensure others in our community were cared for.

They were good people.

I was raised to be a good person, and at my core, that's who I am, still.

Please don't roll your eyes at me; yes, I saw you do it.

Do you not think that vigilantes can be good people? Don't you think that we operated out of a need to do right, to help people, to fix problems others wouldn't or couldn't? Doesn't that make people like me good people?

I couldn't be an actual psychologist, but that didn't mean I gave up my dream of helping others. While in school, we were encouraged to volunteer our time, so that's what I did.

I helped out at what you'd consider a crisis center, where anyone who suffered from addiction, depression, domestic abuse, or even sexual abuse would come for help.

I made a difference there, and that was important to me.

That's all I ever cared about.

I was good at it too. Good like you are here, with your patients, Jack.

Volunteering my time there became a passion for me. I would work to pay my bills, but I volunteered to fill my heart, you know?

I know, I know, I'm emoting, something you wouldn't expect from a man like me, is it?

Men can be in touch with their feelings, and many of us here are. We had no choice, did we, with all the psych visits and evaluations we had to do?

There was one thing I came to realize during my time at the center: the power of emotions.

When you recognize them and not just recognize them but accept them -

they carry the power to heal or destroy.

There were some that came through the center who were able to heal by accepting and learning through the emotions.

But sadly, many others were destroyed.

I took it upon myself to be the one to step in that gap and do what needed to be done, to do what others wanted to do, wished they could do, but didn't.

Turns out, I became a bridge between the broken and the breaker and I was good at it.

CHAPTER FIVE

JD

The bridge between the broken and the breaker.

“That’s what I need,” a woman says, tears streaming down her face. Her body bows beneath the weight of the grief that has become her life, and I steel my heart not to break.

It’s hard. Hard when I hear the despair and destruction in their voices, see the wreckage upon their bodies.

During training, we’re told that we need to become hard, that we can sympathize but not empathize. There is a huge difference.

Sympathy means understanding someone else’s emotions where as empathy means you feel what they feel. We could destroy ourselves if we used empathy in our daily connections with those who came looking for help.

Turns out, when empathy is one of your gifts, not using it can be just as destructive.

Not many men want to admit they are empathetic. But empathy isn’t just a female thing. It’s not like there are male and female emotions, there are just emotions, you know?

I remember that woman who said that she needed a bridge between broken and breaker. Her name was Jen, and she changed my life.

There was a desperation in her voice that rocked me like no one else ever did. Sure, she wasn’t the first to say something like that, and she wasn’t the last either, she was just the first to say it in that specific way.

Listen, when someone hurts you in a way that almost kills you, there is a part of you - it may be small, or it may be larger than life, but there is a part of you that wants retribution and redemption.

A lot of the women I worked with, they were rape victims.

Now, I’m sure you’re asking why would a rape victim want to talk to a male, someone who probably reminds them of their attacker?

It’s a good question.

Here’s the simple answer: it’s not so much about the gender of the person you talk to as you heal, as it’s more about their personality and insight that appeals to you.

I don’t come across as some macho male-dominant figure who needs to exude power and control. Surprising, I know. That’s never been something I’ve been into. If I can utilize that social bias to my advantage, then fine, but deep down, that’s not who I am.

When I listen to a person share their struggles and describe their hurts and fears, I listen as a human being, as someone who cares and

understands. I utilize my empathetic strengths and feel what they feel so that they know they aren't alone in their struggle.

Sure, it would mean I'd go home exhausted after each session, but it also meant that the person I met with went home lighter. If I could take some of that load from them, if I could bear it for them for an hour, a night, a day…it meant I was doing some good in this world, and it was worth it to me.

Little by little, though, I began to feel frustrated.

Here's the thing about rape - at least in my day, I have no idea what it's like now. It was very rare for the perpetrator, the rapist, to get caught and be punished.

Sure, the victim could go to the police or other authority and report it, but the likelihood of being believed and affirmative action taking place…well, that was very rare.

You know what happens when a rapist believes they get away scot-free? They rape again. They get a high off of not getting caught.

Why? Why don't they get caught? Why don't they face justice and understand the pain they put others through?

Mainly because of what our society is like. In all other things, men are strong, virile, and in control until they fall under the gaze of a woman and are seduced by a smile, tight top, short skirt, or any other excuse that we men can come up with.

Nine times out of ten, it's the woman's fault. Men can't control themselves, don't you know?

Doesn't that infuriate you? Make your blood boil? Stir something inside you to change that?

It did me.

When Jen said those words, a revelation came to me. It wasn't a gradual thing, more like a bolt of lightning had hit me and everything in that moment changed for me. My whole DNA structure was rehabilitated and reorganized, and the kernel of who I was, who I was meant to be, burst with life.

I didn't have any answers, but I did ask one simple question: what emotion do you wish your abuser could feel?

The answer was always the same: Fear. Pain. To know what death feels like.

Most women who are raped say they become dead inside. Men, too, although I didn't have many men come to the center looking for help. It's a pride thing, you understand. What man likes to admit they were powerless? Back then, at least, maybe it's changed now. But in my time, no man wanted to admit they'd been raped.

In training, they teach you about the five stages of grief, and grief is what each victim experiences, but it's not all the things.

It's important to know and understand that everyone deals with

trauma in their own way. There may be documented and clinical stages to trauma, but don't let that fool you. Coping mechanisms are just individual means of staying alive that become suggestions for the masses.

When you learn about the stages during training, you think that as long as you have it down pat, that you know the stages and what it takes to get through them, your sessions with the victims will be fine, go smooth, that you'll leave each session feeling like you made progress.

You couldn't be more wrong.

I learned that very early on.

These stages I'd memorized were just rote. They were created by putting together endless counseling sessions and notes and placing labels on emotions that can't be labeled.

Every person deals with trauma differently. You know this. I know this. Sure, we can generalize and offer strategies and advice based on what others have experienced and felt, but the bottom line is that every single person who experiences a traumatic event will deal with it in their own way.

I find that aspect fascinating. Don't you?

CHAPTER SIX

JD TO JACK

Not everyone here likes to talk with the head doctors.

I do. I find it is stimulating conversation - whether we are talking about my trauma or someone else.

Doctor Sterling Roath says I have a fascination with rape victims. Not just a fascination, but an affixation and addiction to the pain and journey these victims face.

Doc Roath isn't wrong.

Of all the things that could happen to someone - I think this is one of the most invasive acts one can do to another.

Violence is enacted upon a person's body without their consent, violence that isn't always seen, and is often gone unnoticed by others.

It's a violence that's easily hidden and I'm intrigued by those who choose to hide their hurts. I will sometimes wonder - do they realize the damage they do not just to their bodies but to their psyche? You know they say that untreated emotional trauma can cause disease?

I believe it. Do you?

I'm sure you do, you've probably seen it countless times, haven't you? The cells downstairs are full of people dying from their anger, fear, worry and unforgiveness. Most of them end up here, don't they?

The priest downstairs says that disease is simple disobedience within our cells. Basically, they're saying sin lives within our bodies and kills us.

Interesting, isn't it?

What about those who do face their traumas? Now those are the ones I respect the most. Not everyone can do it. Could you? I don't know if I could. Well…that's not true. Now, hell yes. But, back then? Yeah, I'm not sure.

Those who want to live life and not face it, it's not a sign of weakness. It's just a choice they made in order to keep living.

Some choose not to live at all.

Those were the ones that hurt the most. When I'd talk with them, try to help them and realize that nothing I did or said helped at all.

Oh sure, I know you can't force someone to live. You can't keep someone alive who chooses to end their life, I know that, but it hurts all the same.

You understand what I'm saying, don't you, Jack?

CHAPTER SEVEN

JD

There are phases to recovery from being raped.

Sure, there are timelines given within each stage - you know, like, a person should be in phase one for two weeks to a month - but considering the fact every person is different, timelines are basically redundant and ridiculous, if you ask me.

Some people get stuck in each stage, unable to find a way out. For some people, living within those emotions is all they know.

The first stage of rape recovery is called the Acute Phase. I had a victim live in this phase until her death, as sad as that is.

Even when I did everything I could to help her, it turned out not to be enough.

Let me tell you about Lydia.

She was gang raped one night after walking home from a long shift at the diner.

Fear, shame, panic, she lived with those emotions until the point she became numb and even somewhat dazed.

She didn't go to the police after her rape. She went home, had a shower, took some pain pills, and went to sleep. She then showed up the next day at work, made it through her shift as if nothing happened and it wasn't until she was about to leave that she froze.

The way she described it, she couldn't move past the back door. She'd worked at that diner for years, always entering and leaving through the back door, never ever having any issues, until the day after what happened to her.

She crumbled. Literally.

She fell to the floor and was in hysterics. Another woman took care of her, had her sit in the manager's office for the longest time until she could breathe, and then called us for help.

Lydia refused to tell the police.

She refused to get the men in trouble, the men who did this to her, because of one simple reason.

She thought she recognized one of them.

Now, I'm not going to lie. Sometimes our minds play tricks on us. Sometimes we see things that aren't there. Does that mean I didn't believe her when she said she swore she saw a childhood friend among the group who brutally violated her?

No. I believed her.

It was why she wouldn't report it to the police.

Because she knew the man.

Knew who'd he become.

Knew he was a police officer himself.

Fuck yeah, you read that right. The ones sworn to protect us were there to hurt her.

She didn't think he raped her, but she remembered seeing him in the distance, as if he were standing guard, making sure they weren't seen.

Fucking asshole.

Now, it took Lydia a long time to admit this to me. Another aspect of the acute phase is the inability to discuss the rape.

It's not like you refuse to believe it happened, but the ability to physically speak about what happened to you isn't there.

Lydia had nightmares. She lived within the range of emotions from being shocked that something like that would happen to her to feeling ashamed that it happened, then guilty that she allowed it to happen in the first place, to anger and a sense of powerlessness that she couldn't do anything to stop it from happening. These are all very liveable emotions.

The first time I saw Lydia, she sat in a chair, legs curled beneath her, and I knew right away she didn't want to be touched.

I think we had daily sessions over the course of two weeks where we'd sit in that room, she curled up in that chair, me waiting for her to open up. I even came in on my days off if I got the call that she wanted to speak to me.

That's the thing about volunteering at a center like the one I worked at. It became life-changing. It became life-altering. If someone needed me, I was there, it didn't matter the time - unless I was at work.

It was our tenth session when Lydia finally cracked.

When I say cracked, I mean, she admitted the one deep longing she'd been too afraid to face.

We sat in the room, both nursing lukewarm cups of disgusting coffee, when she finally said the words I needed to hear.

Until then, my hands were tied. All I could do was listen. I couldn't go to the police. I couldn't take any type of action at all, not until she asked for it.

That day she finally did.

"I wish he was dead."

There was no cracking to her voice as she spoke these words. There was no emotion either.

She couldn't remember any of her other attackers. She saw blank faces, void of any sort of recognition, when she thought back to what had happened.

She knew they had raped her. She knew they jeered and made fun and scarred her body with their knives, etching themselves into her so

she'd never forget them, but they were nothing to her, just things that abused her body.

He was the only thing she remembered, she saw, she fixated on.

And she wanted him dead.

Well, it was a good thing I could help with that, wasn't it?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Here's the thing about being a hunter.

You learn all sorts of skills when it comes to luring, trapping and killing your prey.

Just because I hunted a human instead of a deer, that didn't mean anything changed in the way I prepared myself.

What did prove tricky was how to lure the prey.

Every hunt is different, and what worked for one didn't always work for another.

Once I got a name, it didn't take long to track the guy down. Turns out, he wasn't a cop, but he did work as a security guard.

He also worked on cars as a side gig.

I tracked his route, from work to home, and figured out the best time to grab him.

Since the guy lived outside the city, I waited on the outskirts, pulled over with the hood up, and waited for him to drive by. I waved him down, and once he realized I needed help, he was a dead man.

I clubbed him with a tire iron right on the side of the head and threw him in the trunk of my car. I then drove out to a wooded area I knew quite well.

The area I liked to hunt was owned by a rickety old man who owned too much property for his own good and had no idea what happened on his land.

There's something about being out in the outdoors, in the middle of nowhere, being one with nature, you know?

You realize who your true self is when you're in nature.

I lugged the guy out to an area that I was familiar with. It was a good hike, and it was a good thing I had some muscles. I propped him up against a tree and waited for him to wake up. I had to knock him out a few times along the way, but I never really cared if I did much damage, you know?

When he woke up, I sat across from him on a log, with my gun resting across my legs.

By the time they wake up and realize what's happening, the gun is pointed at them.

I always gave a little speech, you know, along with a choice.

I'm not that cruel.

Every act of sin deserves to be dealt with, and the punishment for his violation is death. But he had a choice: he could take the punishment himself or pick someone else to die in his place.

What do you think most people choose?

What would you have chosen if given the option?

Would you do anything to save your own skin, even letting someone else die for your own actions, or would you step up and own it, even if it meant dying?

You'd be surprised at the responses. I always was.

This asshole, I could see him weighing the options.

Most people don't answer right away, so I help them. See, I do my homework, and I know this jerk lived at home still with his mother. But he had a sidepiece who had a kid.

So I told him to choose between his death or his kid dying in his place.

Was I serious? Fuck yeah. Someone was dying. Someone always died.

You can imagine the amount of sputtering and fake bravado that came about - but when a gun is pointed at you, it's all just words.

I had the upper hand.

I always had the upper hand. No matter what they did - all it would take was one shot, and they'd realize they had no chance.

This jackass, he was really something.

He started spouting on about how he didn't have a kid, and if he did, he didn't know about it, so what did it matter to him? Of course, he then started going after me, saying stuff like who the hell was I to play God and what the fuck did he do that was so bad that he deserved this.

All I did was say a name. Her name.

He got all quiet and even cried. Can you believe that?

I don't know if it was real regret or not, but he didn't bother to give any excuses for his actions.

I'll give him that, at least.

He didn't change his answer. But he did beg me for the chance to apologize to her. Apparently, he didn't realize who she was until it was too late. He spouted some stupid nonsense about not having a choice; he owed someone big time, and this was his repayment.

He didn't rape her, though, like that mattered.

Fucking asshole just stood by and watched while a bunch of others did.

Of course, it mattered.

I reiterated that someone had to pay and that she especially wanted him to be the one to die. I shrugged like it was out of my hands. He asked what about the kid, and I pretended to ponder over it, like I was really considering letting him go.

"Tell you what," I said to him. "I'll give you a good fifteen-minute head start. If you can make it out to the main road without me catching him, I'll let you live."

I glanced at my watch and told him the time started now. He got

to his feet and started running, he ran as fast as he could while I sat there on my stump and waited.

Now, here's what I knew and what he didn't.

To get to the main road would take a solid forty-five minutes, and that's if you were lucky. Me, I could make it in thirty, but I knew where I was going.

All this guy did was run in circles and away from the road, at that.

I waited the full fifteen minutes. I promised him that. I didn't rush, I didn't panic or freak out. I knew the direction he'd scurried off to and hunted him like I would any prey.

I followed in his footsteps. Saw where he fell after stumbling over some rocks. I smiled when I found a place he thought he could hide.

I killed him with one shot.

I took his clothes and personal effects, made a bonfire, and burned everything. I buried his body in some thick undergrowth and covered him up as best I could, but to be honest, I wasn't too worried about him being found. We were on private land, where no one went to hike, and no one had ever found the other bodies.

I knew time and nature would take care of him anyway.

CHAPTER NINE

JD TO JACK

Unfortunately, Lydia wasn't able to move past the living within what happened to her, and she ended up taking her life by overdosing on pills.

It happens. More than you think. More than I thought, that's for sure.

I remember the first time someone I'd counseled died; I was devastated, believing I was the reason because I did or said something or maybe didn't do enough for them.

Here's what I came to quickly learn: you can't keep someone alive.

Whether someone takes their life or not - that's up to them, not you.

Hard lesson to learn, that's for sure.

I didn't regret what I did though.

I regret nothing. Never have. Never will.

Does that surprise you? Why?

Do you believe that some people can be redeemed? Or do you believe that all actions have consequences?

Every vigilante has their own reasons.

Do you know what a vigilante is? Someone who does what others can't. The victims, they couldn't seek retribution, but I could do it for them.

So that's what I did.

My intentions were always good.

Believe it or not, it really doesn't matter, does it.

According to society, I've paid for my crimes. My reward is death and knowing I helped people who couldn't help themselves, I feel good with what I did with my life.

I lied. I do have one regret: that I didn't help more people.

CHAPTER TEN

JD

There's a good number of pedos downstairs. You're aware of that, right?

It seems like the number never decreases - for every one that dies, another arrives.

What is with these people? I've never understood them, and I've tried, I really have tried.

Doc Roath and I have talked about this in circles, but regardless, I am unable to be empathetic or even sympathetic towards monsters who abuse children.

Or maybe it's that I'm unwilling.

As far as I'm concerned, there's only one act of retribution they deserve, and it's not being sent to a hell-hole place like this.

They need to be buried in the ground, preferably while they're alive.

Harsh? I don't think so.

I like you, Jack, so how about I share something with you that no one else knows?

I'll share a graveyard that I created, a graveyard that has never been found, to my knowledge. No one has mentioned it to me, at least. You'd think if they found it, they'd be after me, adding more sentences to my already life sentence.

I always thought I'd take this one to my grave, but I've had a change of heart.

Why?

Oh, that's simple: because of your reaction to my feelings about the monsters downstairs. You don't need to say anything, but I know you feel the same way. Anyone who abuses children deserves a horrific death, and trust me when I say that's exactly what I gave them.

Before I get into that, I need to tell you about Tilly.

Tilly was a seventeen-year-old girl who approached me as I walked to my car after a shift at the center.

She was shy, small, and wore a hat pulled down so far that it almost covered her eyes. She wore a large wool sweater that went down to her knees - basically, she looked like a potato sack.

The girl was hiding. Hiding her body. Hiding her identity. Hiding herself so she couldn't be seen.

She didn't need to tell me she was hurting - the pain poured off her in buckets.

She was quiet like a mouse, barely able to get the words out. I had

to lean forward and ask her to repeat herself before I understood she was asking for help.

I tried to get her to go into the center so we could speak, but she refused to go inside the building.

So we headed to the park right across the street and found a park bench.

Looking at me, you can see why I'm not a threat to women, right? I was average height, small build, with a soft facial structure…I can't tell you how many times I was mistaken for a woman all my life. I went to the gym and bulked up, but even then, I was all slender muscle with no fat on my body. It's amazing what I could bench press, though, even with this frame.

She asked me my name and then nodded to herself. She told me I'd been recommended by a friend of a friend, but she couldn't go inside the building to talk, so she hoped it was okay we were outside, in the open.

I told her it was no problem. I asked who the friend of a friend was but she remained tight lipped and wouldn't reveal any details.

In fact, she didn't reveal much that first time. We continued to meet, daily, after or before my shifts would start. I'd see her sitting on the bench - sometimes I swear she'd sat there for hours waiting for me.

I didn't like that she'd sit there, so I'd share my hours with her, so she didn't have to wait, but when she told me being there in the park was better than being at home, that's when I knew and started to understand.

Understand what, I'm sure you're thinking. Well, think about it a little harder.

She's a seventeen-year-old who hides herself in oversized sweaters.

Who do you think she's hiding from?

Her fucking father.

Her story is a sad one and I had tears when she told me.

Five years ago her mother and younger brother died in a car accident. The roads were slippery and as her mom went around a bend, she couldn't stop and slammed into a truck. They both died upon impact.

Her father was a wreck and so she took it on her frail shoulders to help him as he grieved, never realizing she needed to grieve as well, and her father, a fucking grown ass of a man, should have stepped up and realized that.

She was twelve years old when her family went from four to two.

Twelve fucking years old.

No kid deserves that kind of a life.

Sometime during that first year, her father asked her to start

sleeping in the same bed as him, to keep him company. It started off with them watching movies while she fell asleep - you know, innocent and all that, right?

Didn't stay that way.

[Jack here: JD goes on to give me some further details about what happened but I think we all get it.]

Tilly didn't like to talk about what happened. She just needed me to know and then she went quiet. She wouldn't talk about what happened to her, or even what continued to happen to her. She wouldn't give me her address or her father's details or anything else I needed to report it - because you can be fucking sure, that asshole was going to pay, one way or another.

Tilly was in the second phase of healing - which is officially termed the 'outward adjustment phase'.

This phase is when the victims, or survivors I guess, try to live their lives as if nothing happened. It's not that they don't pretend it didn't happen, but they ignore it and assume because they can live life normally without falling apart, that they are fine. They manage to cope but really all they are doing is ignoring their thoughts and feelings about what happened to them.

I tried to get Tilly to talk to someone else, in an official capacity but she wouldn't do it.

For one, who likes to talk about getting raped by their father? There was no one else in her life, and there was really nothing else to her life. Not yet. She went to school where no one noticed her. After school, before she had to work, she'd sit on the park bench. After work, if the library was still open, she'd hide in there for as long as she could before she went home to a father who more than likely had drank a little too much.

Most of the time he was passed out.

But not all of the time.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

JD

I made a deal with myself never to intervene in a personal way, but for Tilly, I was ready to break that deal.

I didn't have to though.

It was a September afternoon. I wasn't scheduled to volunteer at the center but something nudged me to go sit on that bench.

I waited three hours before Tilly showed up.

By the time she approached, I saw the tears running down her face.

I didn't touch her. I didn't reach out to hug her. But I did offer her a tissue.

She was crying because of me. Because I was there, waiting for her.

I guess that was exactly what she needed that day. She said she'd been praying for it, praying for me to be there, praying that me there was a sign from God that there was more to life than what she was experiencing.

Her father hurt her last night.

She showed me the bruises.

I didn't talk. I couldn't. I wouldn't.

I was angry, so fucking angry inside, but she didn't need that from me.

All she needed was for me to be there for her.

She confessed she was tired. She couldn't wait till she was eighteen. She planned to run, to go someplace, anyplace far enough away from her father that he'd never be able to touch her or hurt her again.

I suggested she go to a shelter. We had a few of them in the city. It wasn't the first time I'd suggested it but this time I was adamant.

She could not return home. Not to the monster who abused her.

She said she was tired of being hurt and for once, she wanted him to hurt.

I can't tell you the relief I felt hearing those words.

I wanted to tell her I'd take care of her, that I'd protect her, that I would make sure he never hurt her again.

But I didn't.

What I did do was walk her to work. I then walked her from work to the library and we sat there, together. I pretended to read a book while she did homework.

When it was time to go home, I walked her there. I wouldn't take no for an answer.

I told her that I needed to make sure she got home safe, that this was more for me than her.

She smiled. She also saw through my lie.

Walking down her street, I was surprised. I wasn't sure what I expected, but it wasn't a nice neighborhood where you assumed everyone lived fairytale lives.

I stood on the sidewalk while she walked around entered through a side door.

Her father's car sat in the driveway. It wasn't an impressive car, but it was a nice one.

I watched as lights turned on throughout the house and imagined her walking from room to room, checking to see where her father was.

I didn't want to imagine if he was passed out or awake.

I walked around to the back and climbed over a fence. The backyard was nice enough, but definitely unused. The grass was a dash too long. The furniture weather weary.

I really didn't know what I was going to do. I had no plan, other than I knew she was not going to sleep one more night in that house with that monster.

So I sat in one of the chairs, off to the side, in a darkened corner where no one would notice me, and I waited.

Turns out I didn't have to wait long. The door in the back opened up and out walked this nothing of a man, carrying a box of empties.

"Fucking kid, who does she think she is talking to me like that? I'll teach her." He kept mumbling this as he stepped out, in his white socks, jeans and a wife-beater.

He never saw me as he walked over to shed. I assume he was putting his bottles in there. I waited till he set them on the ground, then with a rock I'd grabbed earlier, I knocked him out.

Good thing he had his keys in his pant pockets. I half carried him around to the car, set him inside and climbed into the driver seat.

No one was around. No curtains moved to see what was going on, and I certainly didn't see Tilly looking at me through the window.

I sure fucking wish I had though.

At this point, you're probably thinking I'm panicking right?

You'd be wrong.

I drove out to my hunting grounds. He came too a few times, but a quick punch in the right place was all I needed to put him out again.

I dragged him out to where I'd buried a preparation kit, just in case something like this ever happened. I kept a gun in a lock box, along with bullets and all the other fun stuff I'd need.

I sat on a log while I waited for the asshole to wake up. When he finally did, I didn't give my usual speech. I didn't give him the opportunity to choose his life over someone else's. I made it very clear

why he was there and what was about to happen.

I didn't even give him time to run. The moment he stood to his feet I shot him.

The fucker didn't deserve anything less.

CHAPTER TWELVE

JD TO JACK

Yeah, I'm all riled up now.

Sorry about the cussing.

I can't stand men like him. They tend to bring the worst out in me, you know?

Tilly saw me drive out with her father. I didn't know that until the next day when I found her on the bench.

She wrapped her arms around my neck in a quick hug and whispered 'thank you' into my ear.

That's the only time anything about what happened was mentioned.

Her birthday was a week away, so she kept quiet about her father's disappearance until after that.

We kept meeting up. She would sometimes talk about what she lived through, but she mainly talked about how free she felt.

The official story was her father took off and was never heard from again. People assumed he took his own life because they found his wiped-down vehicle out in the middle of the woods with a box of bullets on the front seat.

No, I didn't leave his vehicle in my woods. Yes, I made sure there was no evidence of me in the vehicle. I'm not that stupid.

I got in her in touch with someone at the bank who helped her deal with the financial ramifications of what her life now looked like.

Turns out, her mother had been smart and made a will. All her insurance money was kept in a fund for Tilly, made available at the age of eighteen. There was enough in there for her to start a new life, to become whomever she wanted to, if she were smart.

Unfortunately, Tilly's past caught up with her in an emotional way I don't think she expected. By never dealing with what happened to her, it festered until one day it became too much.

I don't know what happened. I don't know what the trigger was. I don't know why she didn't come to me…but she ended up taking her life.

I cried when I found out. Her funeral was small. Not many showed up and afterward, I found out she'd placed all her money into a joint account that we both shared.

Oh, don't look at me like that. I didn't do anything wrong.

After her birthday, she was lost with her new found freedom and didn't know what to do with it. Even though I had her sit with someone who taught her how to pay her bills and stuff, she never felt comfortable with the money.

She asked me for help.

She suggested a joint account so I could help her with all that stuff.

Which I did. We would sit down every month and go over all the bills, create a budget and then I'd encourage her to spend some of the money on herself. Buy new clothes and shit.

I never touched the money without her there with me at the bank. I want to be clear about that.

What did I do with the money afterward? Well that was easy. I gave most of it to the crisis center. I kept a little for a rainy day, but I'm a simple man with simple needs.

See, I'm not all that bad, am I?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Most of the people I helped were in the third stage of their healing process.

Probably seventy-five percent of those people were in that stage and there's a reason for it.

The one that stands out the most is Emily. She's not one that came up during my trial, which surprised me, but I'm not a stupid man, so I kept quiet about her.

She'd been through enough trauma, I didn't need to add more to it. Wherever she went and whatever life she created for herself, she deserved it and I wasn't going to take that from her.

I first met Emily at the center. It didn't take long for me to realize she was in what is known as the integration phase. What a name for it, integration. Do you know what that word means? Simply speaking, it means to unite or form something to be whole.

Rape destroys. It pulls and tears and splinters people in ways we can't imagine. Rebuilding to become whole again is unfathomable for most survivors and living through the integration stage is like living within the bowels of hell itself.

You get to a phase where you live within the act of what was done to you. It's all you can focus on - the nightmare, the feelings of guilt and shame, fear and anger. Most people will become depressed or anxious. This is when the need to talk about what happened is the strongest, and often the person living through it feels like they're crazy. Anything and everything will become a trigger, and for the people around them, they don't understand it because they assumed the person was getting better.

Emily came to the center at the right time. She was breaking and needed help, and the fact she realized she needed that help showed the amount of strength she had deep inside her soul.

I will never forget Emily, let me just say that.

I've seen a lot of broken people in my life. Both in the real world and in here. But Emily…she was fractured in ways I couldn't comprehend.

Her story is one that would put fear into most single women.

She lived alone, in an apartment, not in the best of areas, but it wasn't the worst area either. She worked full time, had quite the social life, but was single.

Carefree and single is how she described her self back before everything happened to her.

One night, after she'd been at a club with some friends, dancing, drinking…you know, the fun stuff single people did, she headed back

home, had a shower and went to bed. I think it was a Saturday night, if that makes any difference.

In the middle of the night, she was woken up by a sound.

Two men had broken into her apartment and were standing in her bedroom, staring at her as she laid in bed.

Freaky, right?

They held her hostage in her own apartment for two days. They gagged her, blindfolded her, drugged her, did despicable things to her, and there was nothing she could do about it.

[Jack here: I had to remind JD that I didn't need graphic details, that my imagination was crazy enough. You're welcome.]

By the time they left her, drugged and in the bathtub, they'd brutalized her body is so many ways. Her skin was covered in burns, bruises, and cuts from knives.

A friend from work came to her apartment to find her, to see why she didn't show up. It was a good thing she did, too. Since the door was left opened, she walked right in, called out, and found her in the bathroom. She called for help right away.

By the time she came to, she was in a hospital bed, her friend at her side, and at first, she couldn't remember a thing that happened to her. When she was told she'd been found naked, gagged, and blinded by cloth and tape wrapped around her head… at first, she didn't believe it. Then she saw her body, and from how she described it, she was so horrified, she had to be sedated.

Imagine yourself waking up in a hospital room and finding out you were living in a nightmare? Can you imagine how your life would change?

Emily had no memory of anything happening to her. She remembered waking up to find the men in her bedroom and then waking up in the hospital. The hospital shrink said her mind was blocking the memory for her, which happens more often than naught.

When she left the hospital, she left physically knowing something horrendous had happened, but mentally believing she was fine.

Until she walked into her apartment.

While she still couldn't recall anything, her body shut down being back in her home and she couldn't do it. She instead went moved back home to her parents house, living in her small childhood bedroom.

By the time she came to the crisis center, she was having night terrors that spilled into her daytime life. She had to quick work because the slightest thing would set her off - like someone walking up behind her, being surprised, seeing a roll of thick tape, hearing a certain timber of voice, or even someone startling her while in the lunchroom.

Her fears took over her life and she honestly thought she was

going crazy.

That's when her mother brought her to us.

The first thing she said to me was 'am I going crazy?'

When I confirmed she wasn't, the sigh of relief she gave was almost life changing for her.

Having someone who didn't live in her world, someone who understood what she was going through and didn't put pressure on her to heal, it did wonders for Emily.

She was in counseling for a long time, which wasn't a bad thing.

Over the course of the time Emily came to see me, we were able to get her back into the workforce, where we found her a job that didn't interact with many people and where she felt safe.

She got to the point where she started to recall things. At first, everything was hazy. Shadows, voices, muffled words. Then she remembered seeing a tattoo on a hand and a name being said.

She froze at that memory. It took a little prodding from me but she eventually revealed the tattoo was a skull with a snake wrapped around it and the name she heard was Mark.

The kicker - she knew a Mark with a skull tattoo on his hand. She'd met him at a bar the same night the men broke into her apartment.

Finding that out, didn't surprise me.

When she said she'd turned the guy down, that didn't surprise me either.

Men are assholes. We hate being turned down, made fun of or be seen as less than when with a group of friends. He probably came on to her, she wasn't interested since she was there to have fun with her girlfriends and his buddies made fun of him for being turned down.

I can't tell you how many times I heard of a woman being hurt afterward by an asshole like that.

I will say that I didn't know of anyone being held captive in their apartment for two days because of it though.

The Emily I knew was different than the Emily she remembered - which isn't unusual either.

Before her rape, she was a bright, bubbly, wanting to have fun type of girl. She went out to the bars and parties with her girlfriends every weekend. She was someone who enjoyed living life but wasn't ready to settle down, not even with a steady boyfriend.

The Emily I came to know was quiet, withdrawn, couldn't handle being touched, had to have distance between her and any male - me included - and found herself getting lost in the memories she couldn't grasp, the need to remember, the need to know everything that happened to her all encompassing.

That's also normal. And once she realized that, once she accepted

and understood that everything she was dealing with, all the emotions along with the fixation to remember, that it was all normal, I noticed she relaxed a little.

Most people, they don't want to know. Knowing something happened is often enough, don't you think? Recognizing the mind is protecting you from further harm, that's often enough for someone to back off.

Not Emily.

Eventually the parts of her from before the rape emerged, one tiny step at a time. Her tenacity and determination, along with her stubbornness, was always there, they just became stronger during the time I knew her.

I kept expecting her to say the words - especially once she figured out who the guy was.

You know the words I'm talking about, right? That she wished she could make him pay, hurt him like he'd hurt her.

She never said it though.

What she did say was that she bought a gun and was taking lessons on how to shoot it.

She didn't ask if that was a good idea. She just went out and did it.

Her mother hated it. Her father encouraged it. Turns out, he bought a gun too and together they went out into the woods with a friend of his and they shot at targets and then cans.

She was becoming quite good at it and was proud of it.

I was proud of her.

I asked her why she felt the need to buy a gun. Her answer was simple - for protection. She was never going to let herself be hurt again, not if she could help it.

I kept waiting for the words. In fact, I needed the words. I was burning to take action, to right a wrong, to avenge her in the way I knew how.

I was so sure she would say the words, that I went out and started hunting early. I went to that bar, night after night, waiting to see if Mark with a hand tattoo would show up. Week after week he never did.

Until one day, as I sat off in the corner, nursing a beer and keeping an eye on the door, I saw Emily walk in.

She was wearing all black. Her hair was left down, half covering her face. She wore a black sweater that hung loose on her and when she walked in, even with her steps hesitant and obvious fear filling her veins, she had a purpose. She looked around the room, then took a seat at a table close to the doors.

She never saw me.

Somehow, surprise of all surprises, Mark walked in with a buddy.

They went to the bar, ordered their beers, then started to survey the room, looking for fresh meat. They ignored Emily and over the course of two hours, together, at different tables, we watched as Mark and his friend hit on one woman, after another, buying them drinks, getting turned down at some point, starting the dance over again with other women.

Eventually they left with two women, obviously pairing up for a night of sex.

Ten minutes after Mark and his group walked out, so did Emily.

I followed shortly after.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JD to JACK

Was I surprised to see Emily in that bar?

Of course I was.

Looking back, I shouldn't have been, after getting to know her more. But then, at first, hell yes.

Emily didn't seem the type for revenge. She didn't come across to me as the type of woman who would take matters into her own hands.

She seemed fragile. Frail. Afraid of her own shadow.

I expected her to need a hero and so that's how I always viewed her.

That was my mistake.

The signs were all there. The hints at her true personality, at who she was at her core, they all stared at me full in the face.

I should have seen it.

So the fact I didn't, that was on me.

If I had, would I have done things differently?

Since you don't know what I did or what happened, why would you ask me that at this point?

Wait till you hear the rest.

Have a little patience, will you?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JD

Secrets can be hard to keep, don't you think?

Some people love secrets. They love knowing them. They love having them.

Others, the excitement or thrill or fear of the secret can be too much. Sometimes you just need to share - for your own peace of mind, or maybe because keeping something like that to yourself is too much and having someone to share the burden helps.

Me, I can keep secrets.

Emily - she struggled and I knew she had something she wanted to tell me. I could see it in the way she'd wring her hands together, how she'd bite her lips to stop herself at times from saying something, or how she'd sputter when initiating conversation.

I finally confronted her one day when I suggested we go outside to the park and walk while we talked.

"Spill it." That's all I said. I didn't expand on that, didn't pry, didn't bug her. Just the two words and then I shut my mouth and waited.

Some people hate silence. There's an uncomfortableness within silence that you either like or hate.

Emily used to be good with the silence. Sometimes we'd sit for almost an hour without anything being said. I realized she needed the company, not the advice, which was fine with me.

But lately, the silence set her off, she reminded me of a little kid who knew a huge secret but was trying really hard to not share it. You can picture it right?

"Have you ever known a survivor to go after her rapist?" The words tumbled from her lips and she wouldn't look at me, only stared at the ground, where she kicked the small rocks with her shoes.

"Do you feel a need for revenge?" Was she actually going to say it? Was she going to give me the go-ahead?

"I need to prove to myself that I'm strong."

I didn't know how to respond to that other than to confirm and affirm her strength.

It wasn't what she was looking for though.

"They need to know what they did was wrong, and that there are consequences. I won't go to the police, but I will do this myself."

I turned slightly toward her and stared her directly in the face. I needed to understand what she meant by that.

So I asked her point blank. And she answered.

She had a gun. She wasn't afraid to use it. She wanted to make

them pay for what they'd done to her. They were predators and predators didn't deserve to survive.

Her language shocked me, but I did my best to not show it. I couldn't.

She confessed that after realizing who they were, she found them at the bar and started following them. She needed to know if what they did to her, they did to others. She was pretty sure they did. Not all the time, but she followed them to an apartment complex downtown and waited until almost noon the next day, and they hadn't left.

I asked why she didn't call the police.

Turns out, she did.

Three days later, they were back at the same bar, so to her, that meant there were no consequences to their actions.

I had to think about my approach. I wanted to take care of this for her, but I was starting to realize that wouldn't be enough. She needed to be an active participant in order to progress her healing.

Was I worried about her state of mind?

Sure.

Did I think she was going to self harm?

No.

Should I have encouraged her to continue on the path she was on?

Why not?

So here's what I did. I offered to help her. I wanted to make sure she remained safe, I'd be there to support her, but only if she needed it.

She assured me she didn't. She also told me she knew exactly what she was doing and she didn't want me to get involved.

I asked her point blank if she was planning to shoot the men.

She said yes.

Was she planning to kill them?

Only after hurting them first. She wanted to shoot their balls off first.

Yes, those were her exact words.

I started asking the hard questions, just to make sure if she'd through it all through: where was she planning on doing this? When? How was she going to dispose of the bodies? Did she really think she could go through with it?

She planned on setting something up at the bar, pretending she didn't recognize them, spike their drinks and then suggest they leave. She'd take them out to her father's hunting cabin outside the city and kill them there. He had a huge fire pit out there, so she'd burn the bodies with the gas he also kept in a shed.

I was impressed that she'd thought about it. There were a lot of

flaws in her plan though and I pointed the most obvious out.

First, what if they didn't show any interest in her?

She'd make sure they did.

What if she froze up?

She wouldn't.

What if they didn't want to go to the cabin and took her to her apartment instead?

Then she'd kill them there and call the cops after, citing it as self defense.

Wasn't she worried about the fire?

No, there was no one around for miles, so who would notice? She'd stay and make sure the bodies burned and then she'd toss them in the pit her father used when he went hunting.

Her ideas had merit. I didn't like the fire aspect and suggested she just bury the bodies instead.

She laughed and asked in what world could she dig a deep enough hole? True, she didn't have much muscle. But I did.

It took her a bit, but we came up with a working plan that I knew would work and one where she wouldn't get caught.

We met up at the bar but didn't go inside. Instead, we waited for the boys to come out, late, and alone. She enticed them to join her around a dark corner, one at a time, where I waited.

These boys, man, they were stupid. They thought they were about to get a blow job but instead, what they got was a fist to the windpipe which had them down on the ground and out in seconds.

I had to be careful that I didn't hit them too hard. A punch in the throat can kill someone and it doesn't take much force to do so.

We loaded them up in the back of their vehicle and then drove out to her father's hunting cabin. I didn't stop there though. I went further, followed a road that led to nowhere, far enough away that if the bodies were ever found, they wouldn't be linked to her family.

We then tied them up against two trees and I dug a hole in between them.

You ever dig a grave? It's not a fast process. While I dug, she actually shot them both in the nuts after they woke up. While they bled out, she sat there and got off her chest everything she needed to say.

She then shot them both in the head.

The girl had done good when it came to target practice.

We buried them, covered the area with leaves and branches, and walked away.

We drove their car to an old abandoned gas station just on the outskirts of town and took off the plates. We parked it in the back and trusted someone would steal it one day. I'd had her drive my vehicle

to this location after we loaded the boys up in their car, so that we'd have a way to get back.

It was a quiet drive home. She thanked me for helping her. She said she was leaving for a while, that she'd convinced her parents she needed to go somewhere new where there were enough horrible memories. They agreed and decided to head to someplace warm where they helped set her up with an apartment while she found a new job.

I didn't ask where she was headed. She didn't offer it either.

It was better that way.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JD TO JACK

I've no idea what happened to her.

I hope she had a good life. That she's living a good life still.

I hope she was able to move on and find ways to live without fear.

I have to believe she did.

No, I won't tell you where the cabin is or the last name of her father or anything else you might use to find those bodies.

Those men deserved what they got. They deserved the death they received and they deserve to be left forgotten about, too.

Don't you agree?

Too many rapists go free. I have no regrets about the many that I put in the ground.

I bridged that gap between survivor and monster. My life had purpose. It held meaning and really, isn't that what we want with our lives? To hold meaning and purpose?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JACK

Jimmy Dale died at four ten in the morning.

I said I wanted to know what triggered the turn for Jimmy Dale and I can safely say I got my answer.

You got to give it to the man, his heart was in the right place.

If someone I knew personally, someone close to me, a loved one, was hurt like the women he knew…I'm not sure I wouldn't do the same thing, you know?

It took me a bit to process his death. I went back to my office and sat there, staring at the wall for a bit.

Some of my patients tend to leave an impression. Jimmy did that.

SOMETHING NEW IS COMING YOUR WAY

I'm cooking up a new story and thought you might be interested. Let me share with you the opening of a new Haunted series.

THE HAUNTING OF GHOST LAKE

Chapter One

August 14, 1993

JAKE WILKINS

Jake wipes his clammy palms against his jeans as his foot eases just enough off the gas pedal. Maybe driving sixty down the dark, tree-lined dirt road isn't the smartest thing to do, regardless of David, his best friend, egging him on.

The last thing he wants to do is drive headfirst into one of these trees, thanks to a rut he can't see. His dad will kill him if he does, especially considering the old man helped buy this piece of junk.

"Slow down, asshole!" Mandy, David's girlfriend, barks out from the back. Jake glances at her through the mirror. She's got one hand touching the roof, the other giving him the finger.

Nice one. David sure knows how to pick the classy ones.

Despite being best friends, he doesn't get why David put up with her bullshit. She's always bitching and complaining about any and everything Jake does. It's like his best friend is immune to her cattiness. Either that, or he's just ignoring it.

Ten to one, they don't last. Jake gives them two weeks, tops. A month, at the most.

Is he going a bit fast, hitting the bumps too hard, and making Mandy and Crystal, who are in the back seat, hit their heads on the roof? Of course, he is - but that's what makes it so much fun.

Besides, from the ass-grinning smile on David's face, he's enjoying this.

So why does he put up with Mandy? It doesn't hurt that she's so hot, with a pretty face and banging body. If anything, it's the blowjobs. It's what she's known for.

Jake glances in the rearview mirror at Mandy and her friend, Crystal. Mandy gives him a dirty look, then leans forward, setting her hand on David's shoulder, and whines, "Dave…"

David looks over at Jake with a *sorry man* type of look and suggests maybe slowing it down even more.

"Whatever." It doesn't matter anyway. Ghost Lake Sanatorium is just up ahead. The place has been neglected and abandoned for forty years or more. The sides of the building are black with age, and every window is broken, and most of them are boarded up. The front doors have slabs of wood nailed across them with huge DANGER, NO

TRESPASSING signs on them.

Jake stops the car alongside the barbed wire fence that surrounds the building. The police are dumb if they think that's going to stop anyone from going inside and checking things out.

The stories about the sanatorium are too enticing not to see for yourself. He's been wanting to come forever, and yet…there's something about the place that has kept him away until now.

His leg bounces as he stares at the building up ahead. This place has a creep factor of *off-the-scale,* and from the way his heart beats against his chest, he's surprised everyone in the car can't hear how scared he feels.

One glance at David, and he's feeling it too. Jake wipes off all emotion from his face. The last thing he wants is for Mandy to notice.

She'd never let him live it down.

"Anyone see the monster?" Crystal leans forward, her hands gripping the front seats.

Last year, two middle schoolers snuck into the building and claimed they saw a shadow monster with glowing red eyes that chased them around. One of them had fallen through a hole in the front foyer and cut his leg as they ran out. His parents then went to the town council demanding more security be placed around the run-down building, ruining the experience for everyone else.

Coming here is a right of passage of sorts. What used to be a sanatorium for TB patients was then turned into a mental hospital for the criminally insane. What better place than out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by mountains and a lake, in freaking northern Canada. Anyone who tried to escape died by natural causes - whether the wild animals or the cold, and those who didn't ended up on the chopping block of some insane doctor and nurse duo who sold their organs on the black market for profit.

It turns out money isn't the answer to everything because that duo was rumored to have been torn from limb to limb by a group of inmates in the late sixties.

"Well, are we doing this or what?" Mandy opens her door and gets out.

Jake can tell, despite her bravado, Mandy is scared shitless. So is Crystal, from the way she audibly swallows as she stares at the building, illuminated only by the bright full moon.

They all exit the car and gather in a group, a nervous energy pulsing between them.

Jake takes his shot, using this as the perfect situation to get close to Crystal. She's cute, not hot like Mandy, but there's more to her than just her smoking body. She's friendly, always ready with a smile for him, and with the cute little gap between her two front teeth, she's

quite adorable. She's only ever given him the friends vibe, and that might be because he heard she hooked up with Mike Langdon, a senior, about a month or so ago, but until she turns him down, he'll keep believing there's a makeup session happening between them tonight.

“Are you sure we won’t get caught?” Crystal's voice shakes with uncertainty, which is funny since this was her suggestion.

“That’s what makes it more exciting.” Jake winks at her as he edges closer.

"Everyone ready?" Jake asks.

David reaches inside the car and and grabs a bag from the floor. In it is a bottle of vodka along with a jug of orange juice and some cups. "I am now."

"Now that's what I'm talking about," Mandy says as she places everything on the hood of Jake's car and mixes up the drinks. She passes everyone a cup, and they chug it back in a hurry, Jake especially, needing a little extra liquid courage if he's going to get close to Crystal.

"I thought you were bringing beer?" Jake says under his breath.

David shrugs. "This is all I could find. The vodka was at the back of the cupboard, so it won't get missed, and mom always buys extra orange juice for me."

Ever since they started hanging out in middle school, David has had an addiction to orange juice. On his own, he probably drinks a full jug every day. It's so bad that Jake's mom now keeps a jug of the juice in her fridge for when David comes over, which he does every day after school.

Once the buzz starts to set in, Jake takes out wire cutters from the car's trunk. "Always be prepared, as the old man says," he holds them up with a feeling of bravado.

Sniping a hole large enough for them all to climb through doesn't take much work. David goes first, then holds the fence for Mandy to crawl through after him.

Holding the fence open for Crystal, she's about halfway through before she backtracks.

"I almost forgot the whole reason why we're here," she says as she dashes back to the car. She returns, clutching a bag tight to her chest, and plants a little kiss on his cheek. "Thanks for waiting for me," she says.

"No problem," Jake mumbles as he watches her bend, giving him a perfect glance at her perfect ass.

Jake stays at the back of the pack as they walk toward the building, while David is up head, his steps way more eager than they should be.

David has been wanting to come here for ages, and it's always Jake who would find one excuse after another not to. So far, David hasn't caught on, at least, if he has, he hasn't said anything about it.

Seeing the place up close, Jake believes all the stories are true about this place. It has to be haunted; there's no other answer for the creepiness that lingers in the shadows as if those very tendrils are fingers just wanting to wrap themselves around the unsuspecting victims.

Victims like them.

If the girls weren't here, Jake would be hightailing it back to the car, David laughing at him be damned. This place gives off all the wrong vibes, and it's going to take a hell of a lot more alcohol to get him to walk through that door.

The closer they get, the more Jake wants to run. Fear finger walks its way up his spine, and he tries hard to suppress his shudder before anyone notices. Dread dances around him, its spikes catching on his jeans as he walks through the tall grass, and his stomach surges as he the imagery of skinless fingers poking up from the ground play with his head.

David races ahead and climbs up the rickety wood stairs, Mandy not too far behind him. She calls out to Jake and Crystal, telling them to hurry up. Crystal glances back toward Jake, her steps slowing as if waiting for him.

"You okay, slow poke?" Her eyes twinkle as she teases him.

All Jake can do is stare at her lips, remembering the touch of them on his cheek, and he swallows hard.

"Yeah, let's do this," he says with false bravado.

David grabs at the boards covering the door and, with the help of Mandy, pries a few away from the door.

"Jake man, come help," David says, grunting as he pulls harder.

It doesn't take much for the remaining boards to pop off. David tries the door handle, turning it one way, then the other, when they all hear a loud click, and the door nudges open as if on its own.

David jumps back with a 'huh' and then quickly laughs to cover up his surprise.

"Dude, the door was locked," David says to Jake.

"As if. Looks open to me."

"They must have forgotten to lock it when they boarded it up. Weird, huh?" Mandy says.

David nudges the door open wider just as an icy breeze blows over them, wrapping around their skin.

Both the girls yelp while David laughs. Jake joins in, but it's forced, and he prays to God that none of them notice.

The door slams shut just. They jump, and Crystal quickly grabs

Jake's hand, squeezing hard.

David laughs again. "Maybe the place is haunted, and the spirits don't want us to come in," he teases as he nudges Mandy.

"Shut up, you asshole. That was probably just the wind closing the door, right?" Mandy glances back toward Crystal, then Jake.

He sees the challenge on Mandy's face, daring him to prove himself, unless he is too chicken, and if there's one thing he will not do, it's prove Mandy right.

David opens the door again, pushing it open hard enough that it hits the back of the wall, then slaps Jake on the back.

Is David scared too, but pretending to be brave for Mandy? If that's the case, Jake can do it too. Especially if it means Crystal doesn't let go of his hand.

“Come on, guys. You’re not scared, are you?” David smirks, then steps through the open door.

For one split second, Jake almost doesn't do it. A shudder runs over his skin the second he steps across the threshold, and Jake's reminded of a comic he'd just read, where a group of kids walk into the gaping maw of some grotesque creature, and through the black hole of its mouth they're swallowed and morphed into hell.

Jake pulls out the flashlight he'd stuffed in his back pocket and turns it on, sweeping it back and forth along the walls and floors as they creep through the place.

The place is disgusting, with garbage everywhere, broken tables and chairs, and shards of glass crunching beneath their shoes. In one room, there's a single mattress on the floor, and he made the mistake of letting the light stay in one place, illuminating the dark stains. He doesn't want to think about what those stains were made from or how they were made.

"There's something wrong with this place," Crystal mutters to him. She released his hand a while ago, but she has yet to stray more than two feet away from him, which, to be honest, Jake is more than okay with.

Jake feels it, too. The air carries a thick layer of dread that coats his sweaty skin.

"Is anyone else here?" His voice squeaks as he asks the question.

"Seriously, dude?" David laughs as he turns and gives him one of those *what the fuck is wrong with you* looks.

"I feel it too," Crystal says, touching Jake's arm. "Like someone is watching us."

"Someone or something…" Mandy contorts her voice to sound like a witch, and Jake gives her the middle finger.

They can laugh all they want, but the thick layer of goosebumps over his skin tells a different story.

Someone or something is here with them. Watching him.

Not just him but all of them.

A steady scratch-like nails on a chalkboard combined with the sound of a dozen rats scurrying about, Jake turns in circles, trying to determine where the sound is coming from. If it's rats, they're definitely in the walls, and yet, the sounds are both above his head and right beneath his feet.

Crystal gasps and jumps. "Something just touched my ankle."

David laughs, but he doesn't sound as sure as before. "Come on, don't be stupid. You're just letting the place get to you. Those sounds are just rats. The cold draft is from an opening somewhere. That's it. The rest are just stories someone made up to keep kids away."

Jake copies his laugh. "Yeah, probably."

"Come on. I hear there are tunnels beneath us. Now that would be the perfect place for our thing tonight. After all, this was your idea, Crystal, right?"

Crystal hugs the bag she'd brought close to her chest and steps away from Jake.

"Let's do this."

THE ECHOES OF SIN - A JACK ORIGINAL

THE ECHOES OF SIN

This one is a little different but I wanted to let you know about this book. If you like anything supernatural - think angels and demons, nephalim and a spiritual war - then you might enjoy this book. It was the first one I've ever written and my VIP Addicts group convinced me to publish it so everyone could read it.

I hope you enjoy it!

MORE CONFESSION BOOKS?

Hell yes.

I've got notepads full of confessions.

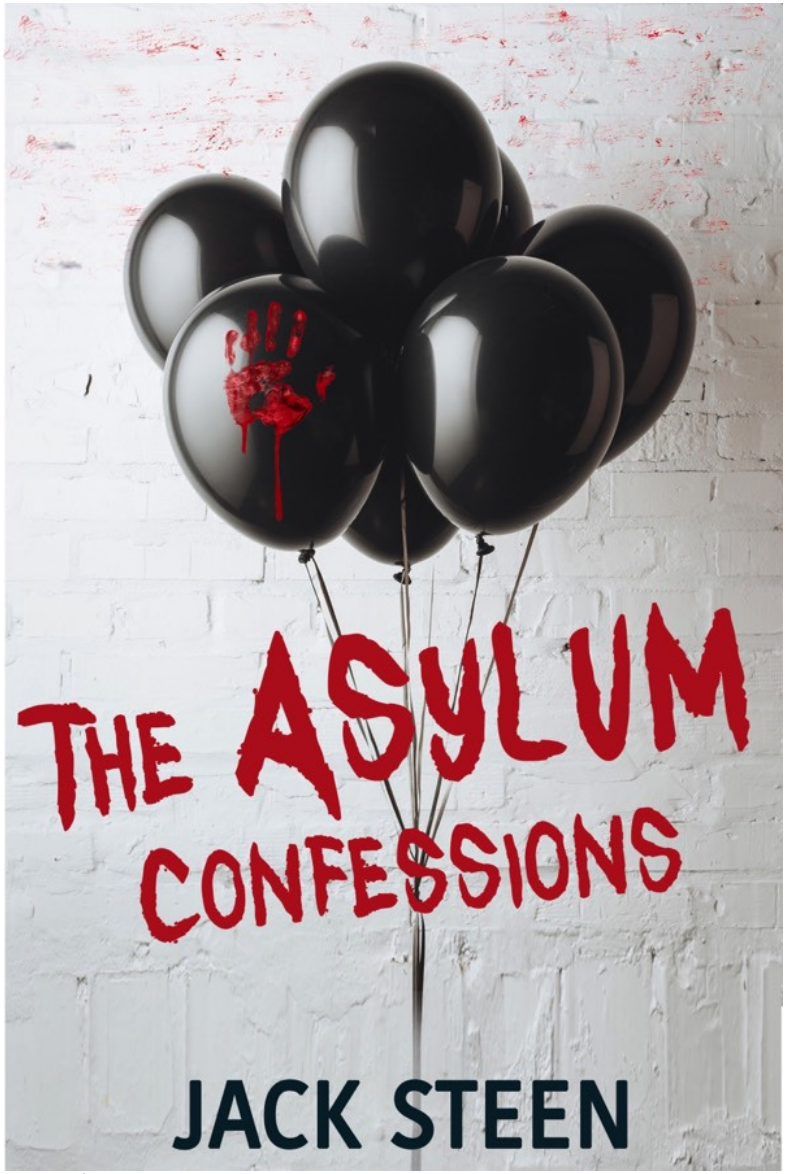
If you want them, I'll make them available. The more you buy, the more beer I drink, so guess it's a win-win.

Head to my website and sign up - www.jacksteenbooks.com and join my NEWSLETTER

Or, if you want to become an Asylum Addict, join my VIP ADDICTS SUBSCRIPTION GROUP, where you'll get to read whatever I write for free and before anyone else and even get some free stuff. https://reamstories.com/jacksteen

Turn the page to find out about the next confession book coming your way!

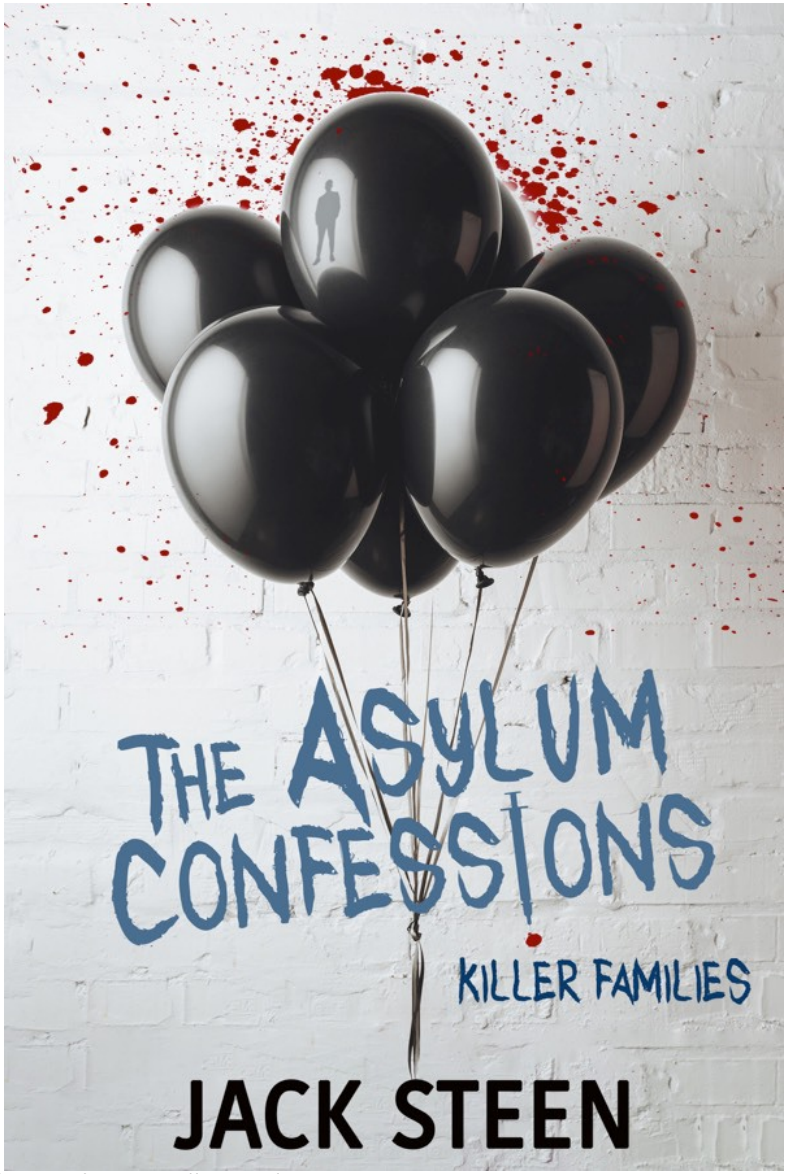
CONFESSION BOOK - THE ORIGINALS



The Asylum Confessions

The one that started it all! These are a few of my favorite confessions - if you haven't already read them, I hope you enjoy the journey!

CONFESSION BOOK - KILLER FAMILIES

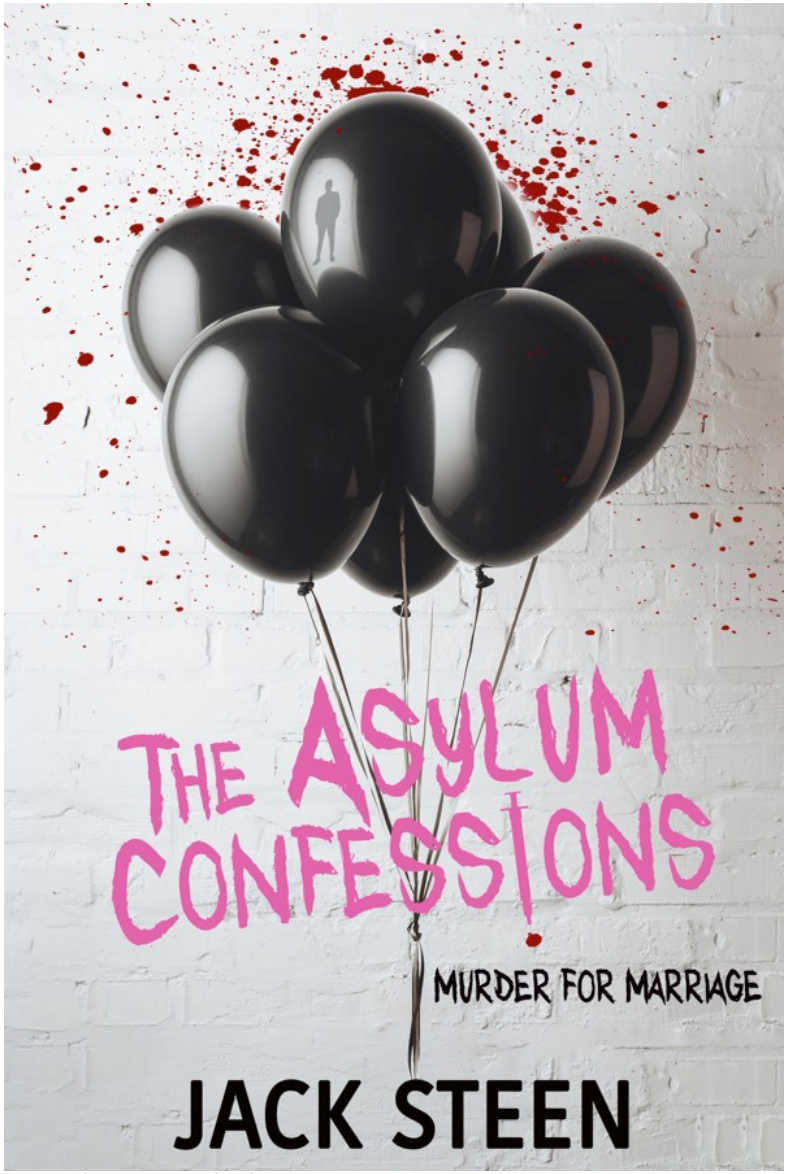


The Asylum Confessions: Killer Families
More confessions that deal with all things family related.

- One is a father who just wanted to protect his little girl.
- Then there's a pig farmer who never should have had children.
- One wants you to believe he's the brother of a mob boss.

- And then there's one would argue she should receive the Mother of the Year award.

CONFESSION BOOK - MURDER FOR MARRIAGE



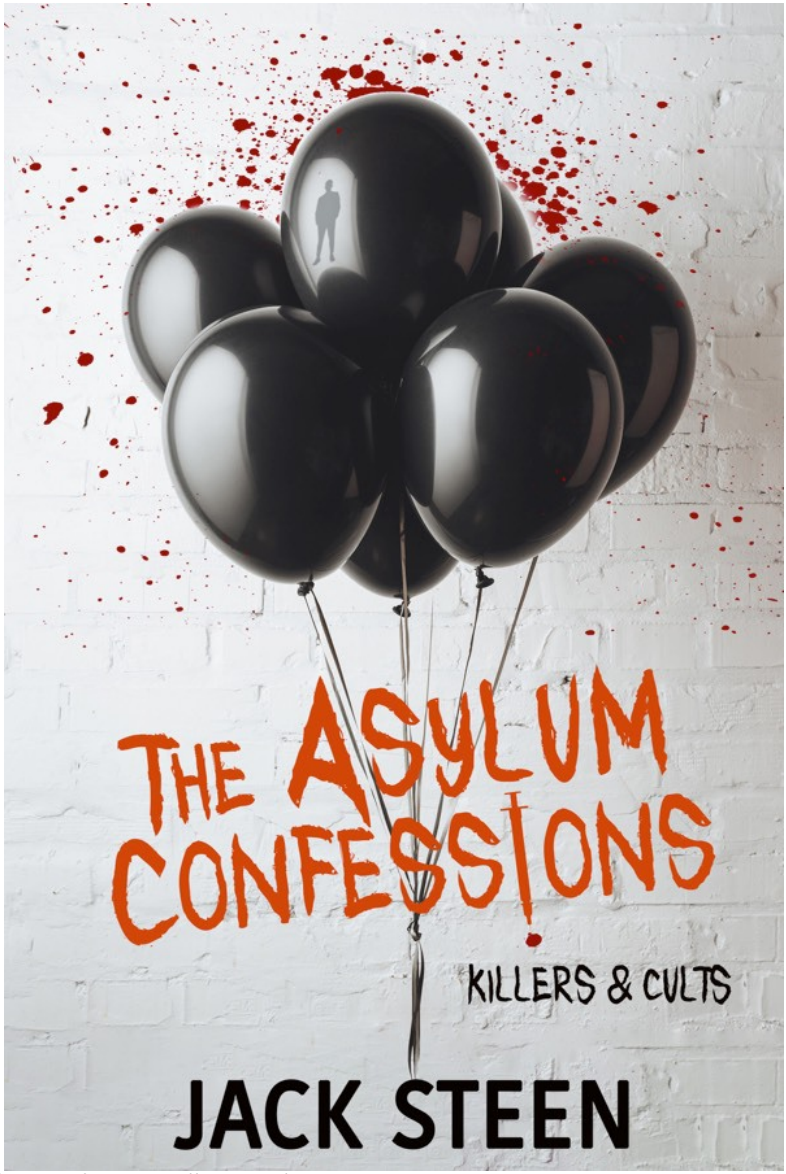
The Asylum Confessions: Murder for Marriage

The couples that kill together…well, they for sure don't stay together, right? These confessions deal with couples…

- One is a Preacher with a past.
- Another shouldn't be trusted.
- What's with farmers with buried secrets?

- And another who has a thing for soil and gardens.

CONFESSION BOOK - KILLERS & CULTS

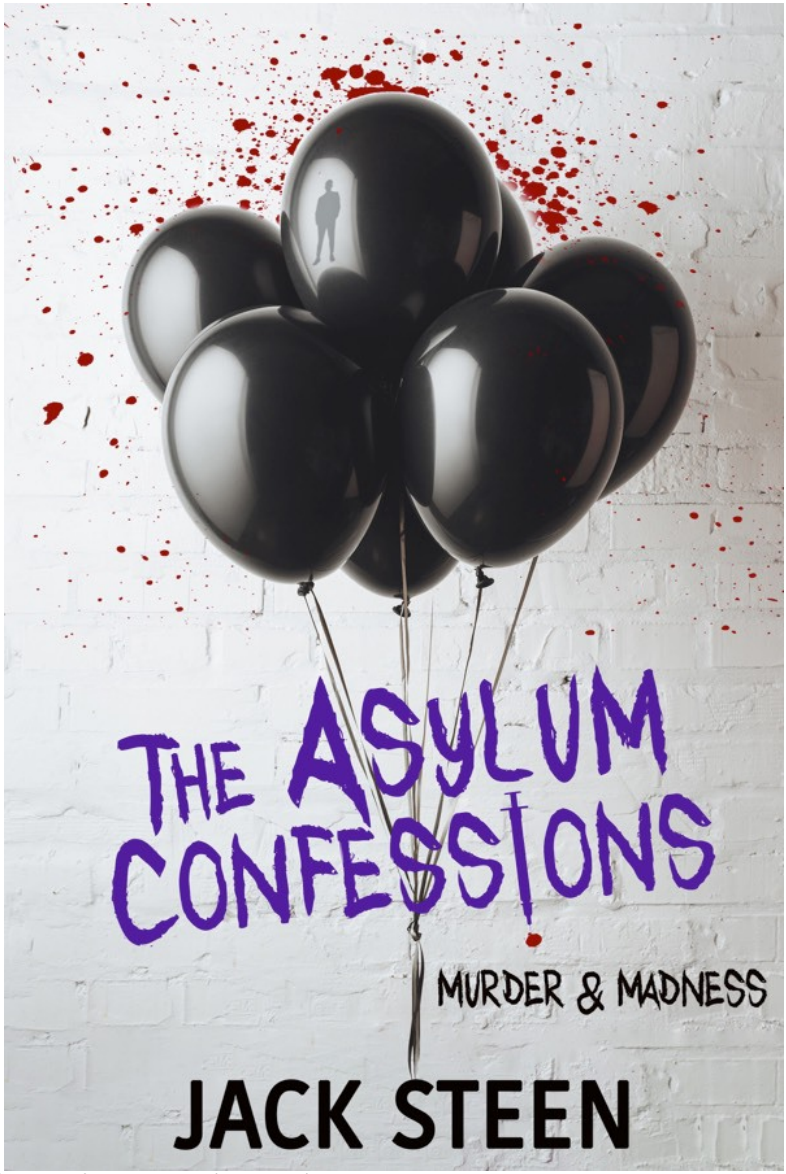


The Asylum Confessions: Killers & Cults
Trust me on this…these confessions will take you on a wild ride:

- One thought she gave birth to the antichrist.
- Another was called the Candyman...any guess why?
- One grew up in a cult and believes he was the first of a 'pure' race.

- Then there’s the guy who claims he was part of a secret test by the government and I've been waiting on his confession for a while!
- Finally, this one who loved Halloween and believed in all the rules. I sure you hope you didn't break any...

CONFESSION BOOK - MURDER & MADNESS

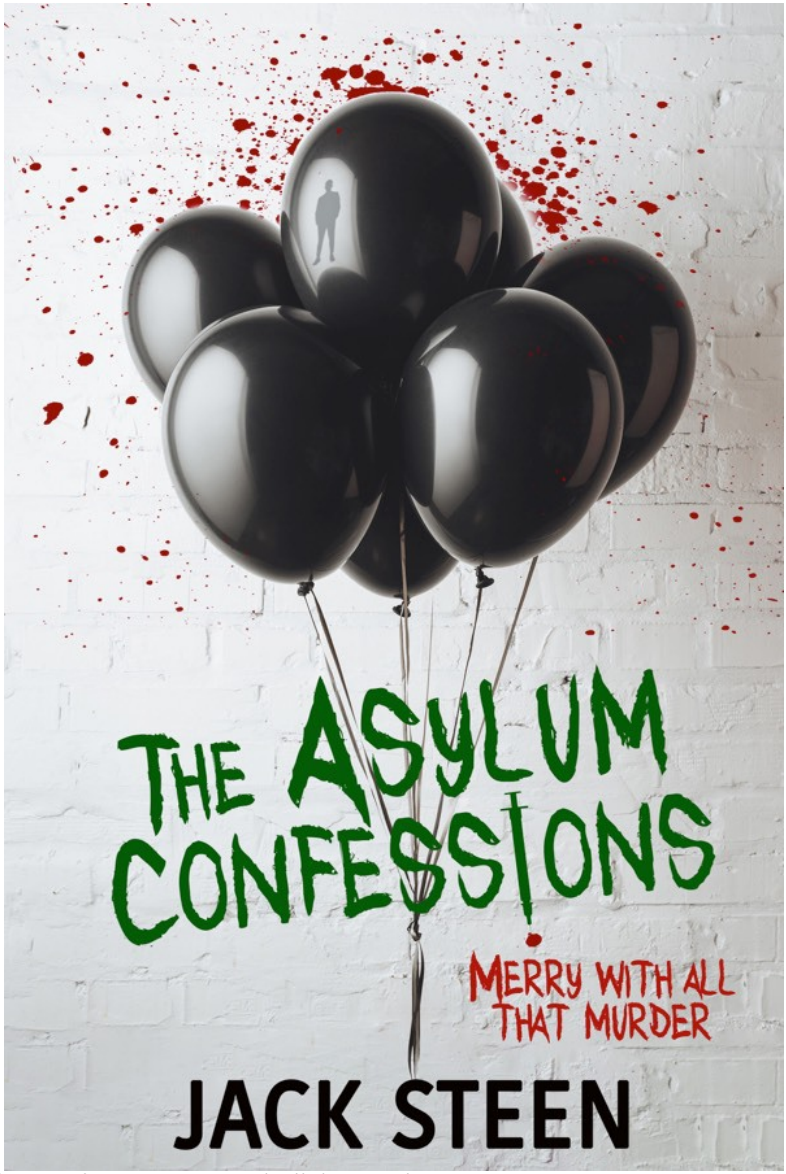


The Asylum Confessions: Murder & Madness

This book has confessions that remind me of the original Grimm brothers tales - you know, the good ones.

- Think Modern Day Sleeping Beauty – with a twist.
- One with a resemblance to Rapunzel that is kind of scary.
- One reminds me of Cinderella…with a thing for shoes.

CONFESSION BOOK - MERRY WITH ALL THAT MURDER



The Asylum Confessions: Merry with all that Murder

Christmas isn't always a merry thing for people. These confessions focus on the holiday theme and patients who:

- Likes to nibble on sugar cookies while watching his victim die
- Another likes to replace the jam in the thumbprint cookies

with blood

- One patient has a thing about gingerbread cookies and revenge
- And then there’s one - give her some candy cane shortbread cookies - after all she's been through, she deserves them.